THE PRINCESS AND THE PLOUGHMAN

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The Princess and the Ploughman

by

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I

WILD wind blowing in from the open sea came upon the softer spirit of earth brooding over blooming gardens, burgeoning woods and low-lying meadows lush with grasses, and meeting thus the two clasped and mingled; then stooping to earth, rushed with soft clamor of shaken leaves through groves and thickets; ruffled into fretted silver the blue of pools and streams; snatched the breath of a million blossoms and bore it all living into the streets and alleys of the crowded town, pausing midway in prankish mischief to whirl a sheaf of

white pages from the lap of a girl, who sat under the shelter of a wide-spreading tree.

The girl followed the unlooked-for soaring of her thoughts with startled eyes of clearest gray, then she sprang up and pursued them with swift-footed energy, as they danced and fluttered high overhead, like giant butterflies drunk with the wine of summer.

A pair of these literary vagrants swooped and hovered irresolute in a tangle of meadow-sweet and wild roses. The girl caught them with a little cry of triumph, leaving a fragment of her pink gown in the rose thicket, as she dashed after a third page which whirled in mad spiral flight across the bed of a brook. Splashing through the shallow water with reckless feet, she captured her prize as it hesitated upon the verge of a freshly ploughed field, across which the far glimmer of a fourth and fifth could be seen skimming the ground like homing swallows. The pursuer stopped for an instant to glance ruefully at her wet white shoes, then gathering her skirts

in both hands gave chase with renewed ardor.

A man who had been deliberately driving a deep sub-soiling plough through the stiff loam on the farther side of the field pulled up his horses and stood watching the pink figure in its difficult approach across the steep furrows, a twinkle of amused comprehension dawning in his eyes as the girl (she had almost reached him now) pounced upon one of the flying pages. The fifth, and last was blowing directly towards him, with wavering, sidelong swoops, as if half-minded to surrender at discretion. The man reached out and caught it deftly.

It was a large, fair page, well covered with small, firm writing.—"Where her delicate feet had touched the earth, green herbage flowering sprang" (he read). "Love tracked her steps, and enchanted longing pressed hard after."

He would have read further, being, obviously, quite unaware of the impropriety of his

action; but the girl's hand was already outstretched towards her illusive quarry.

"Please give it to me," she said, breathing hard. "It is my theme on the poetry of Hesiod. The wind blew it away just as I was finishing it."

He turned to look at her with the fine deliberation which he had been bestowing upon the stiff clods of earth his mighty plough had turned up glistening to the sun.

"It is very beautiful," he said, slowly—"what you have written, I mean. It would have been a pity to lose it." He surrendered his prize with an apologetic glance at his brown hands.

The girl rapidly sorted the recovered pages. "Yes," she said, in a preoccupied way, "and that last page was quite the most important of all."

The man surveyed her with grave attention, as she stood (quite unaware of his eyes), her slender shape in its swathing draperies of pink drooping a little over the earth-stained pages

of her manuscript, her heavy hair, half-fallen from its careless fastenings, glistening like ripe leaves in the broad light of approaching noon, her bosom rising and falling with the deep breath of her flight. His slow, meditative eyes took definite note of the gracious curves of her red mouth, parted a little to ease the tumultuous heart-beats, of her gray eyes, darkly fringed, like clear pools under a twilight sky, of her long hands, white and exquisitely maternal as the hands of a Madonna. Behind her the ploughed field spread its warm browns and grays in subtle harmony. He sighed regretfully, as she glanced about her with manifest intention of renewed flight. He would have liked to look at her longer.

"It will be easier to regain the road from this side," he suggested. "The ploughed ground is hard to walk over."

"But I didn't come from the road," she said. "I was sitting under a tree writing, and the wind carried my pages away. I ran after them—I didn't know nor care where."

"Where did you come from when you sat down under the tree to write?" he asked. "I have always lived about here," he added, with a grave smile.

Her eyes looked at him calmly. She was noticing, for the first time, that he was young and possessed of a tall, powerful body. His face (now that she observed it) would not have attracted her second glance, since it was, in common with many faces of men, plain, large-featured, clean-shaven; his eyes, blue and penetrating, met her own with a clear directness of gaze.

"If you will tell me where you are stopping," he repeated, tentatively.

"Of course!" she murmured. "I am always so stupid. I am staying at Dr. Vivian's cottage. It can't be far."

"No," he agreed; "you have only to cross this bit of pasture and yonder meadow; the house is hidden behind the trees just at the crest of the hill. There is a brook between the meadow and the wood; but it isn't deep."

The girl looked down at her muddy shoes with a pucker of her white forehead. "I know just how deep it is," she replied. "I waded through it once this morning, I sha'n't mind doing it again. I think I ought to tell you that my name is Mary Adams. I am sorry I have kept you from your work, and—and I thank you."

She turned abruptly and walked away, her drabbled pink gown trailing the stubble.

The man followed her with his eyes till she had disappeared behind the leafy hedge. Then he gripped the handles of his plough; his obedient horses bent their gleaming flanks to the strain, and again the tough sod of the pasture yielded in a lengthening furrow of brown earth.

II

A WOMAN may fall romantically in love with another woman. Given the requisite psychological correspondences, and the phenomenon becomes inevitable. Men are prone thoughtlessly to ignore or ridicule so æsthetical a relation between women. Nevertheless, they sometimes stumble upon it to their undoing.

These innocent, shadowy premonitions of a larger fate for the most part have their birth, flourish, and die under the arching elms of those tranquil New England villages where the strenuous processes incident to the higher unfoldment of the female intellect may be said to possess the place as a soul possesses its body. When, in such a college town, Mary Adams, tall and fair, her twenty studious years empty of vain flirtations, first set serious gray

eyes upon Felice Vivian, tiny and dark (as a rich, red rose is dark), this very real though illogical passion sprang into instant being. The two clave to each other, if not after the world-famous masculine pattern of Damon and Pythias, or David and Jonathan, like innumerable woman lovers uncelebrated in prose or rhyme since the days of Ruth and Naomi.

Mary Adams had chosen her present scholastic career in order to escape the irksome conditions of a home, which in reality was little more than a respectable shelter, and which of late she had found acutely intolerable. And this because of the posthumous solicitude of a paternal aunt, coldly embodied in the legal phraseology of a last will and testament.

This worthy female, herself unwedded to the day of her death, had, nevertheless (or, perhaps more exactly, because of the fact), conceived marriage to be of the highest possible importance to a woman. She had therefore, being of a sound and disposing mind and

memory, given and bequeathed the whole of a very handsome fortune to her dearly beloved and only surviving relative, Mary Adams, with the very reasonable condition attached that said niece, having duly survived to the age of twenty-three years, should be legally married to the man of her choice. The testator further provided that should the said Mary Adams fail to survive to a marriageable age; or, having survived, should she refuse to comply with the specified condition, the estate was to pass in its entirety into the hands of certain trustees, to be devoted to the foundation of an institution of learning for the higher education of the native females of the Hawaiian Islands.

Old Judge Chantry, sole executor of the Lydia Adams estate and guardian of the girl, had been particularly explicit as to the one condition attached to the untrammelled ownership of the property, on the occasion selected by him as proper to a full understanding of the terms of the will. The fateful interview

took place in the library of the Chantry mansion on the morning of the girl's nineteenth birthday.

Between the tender age of six, when the control of her person and prospective fortune had passed into the hands of Judge Chantry, and the present day, Mary had grown from a small, shy, silent child, with eyes much too big for her pale, narrow face, into a tall, slender woman, still pale, with the exquisite pallor of a rose-tinted white flower. Her mouth, brilliantly red and curved like a heart, seldom unclosing in speech or laughter; her gray eyes watching the world, calm, serious, unafraid. She might have been beautiful had she ever thought of beauty in connection with herself, but the dull routine of governesses, tutors, and text-books conducted in the large, dull rooms of the large, dull house had left her, if not exactly dull, something very like it.

Judge Chantry told himself with suppressed irritation that the girl was "limp as a string." His voice, never mild, took on an added note

of harshness as he noted the easy curves of her pliant young body and the careless masses of her heavy red hair, tumbled rather untidily behind her little ears. The girl's face had expressed neither surprise nor indignation as he pointedly set forth in language carefully stripped of legal verbiage the unalterable conditions of the will.

"Understand," he concluded, sharply, "you must marry on or before your twenty-third birthday, or lose all interest in your aunt's estate. Failing to do this, I am bound to tell you that there is no provision made for your future, beyond the very inconsiderable amount coming to you from the estate of your deceased parents. Do you quite follow me?"

"Quite," replied Mary, without display of emotion. "I think," she added, after a thoughtful pause, "that Aunt Lydia Adams might have trusted my judgment as well as her own. I have never thought before about being married. I never shall think of it now."

"Tut!" said her guardian; "you will marry, of course."

"How can I marry, sir, when I don't know any man?"

The virginal simplicity of the question brought the simulacrum of a smile to the shrewd eyes of the judge.

"I know several men," he observed, meditatively; "in fact, I know the man for the emergency, which is far better than knowing a thousand worthless fortune-hunters, such as would gather about you like hungry hounds, should the terms of this—er—peculiar will be made known."

He paused and tapped noiselessly with his dry old fingers upon the blotting-pad which lay before him, while he studied the face of his ward with unaccustomed eyes—to wit, the eyes of a man.

"You have grown into a not bad-looking woman, Mary," he said, at length; "with a Paris gown or two and diamonds — there are diamonds, you know, which belonged to your aunt."

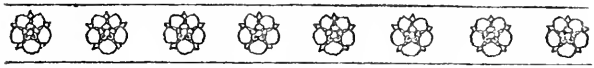
The girl stared at her guardian with unsmiling gravity. "What do you mean to do with me, sir?" she asked. She did not change her position in the great carved chair in which she was sittting by a hair's-breadth, yet the judge, who was still watching her with the eyes of a younger man, became aware of something like an obstinate stiffening in the long lines of her figure.

"I mean to present to you my nephew, Jerome Chantry," he answered, without circumlocution. "He is a shrewd, conservative man, who would look after both you and your fortune as they should be looked after."

"Do you mean that I am to marry him?"

"I should hardly have put it that way," replied the judge, dryly. "But why not? Jerome's wife died— Hum! let me see; it must be something like four years ago. He will doubtless be obliged to me for calling his attention to the matter; and you—"

Mary arose from her chair, slowly, as she did everything, her young slenderness and the



exceeding fine whiteness of her skin glimpsed above her close-fitting, dull-colored gown, giving her the quaint, Old World look of a mediæval princess.

"I shall not marry Jerome Chantry," she said, tranquilly. "I shall not marry any one."

A month later she acquainted her guardian with a decision which she had been pondering slowly, as she pondered all things. "If I am not to have any money," she said, "I must earn my own living. I shall teach. It is the only thing I can do. I have decided to go to college. I shall graduate before I am twenty-three. I can then take care of myself."

The old man permitted himself a dubious smile. "Very well," he said, "and meanwhile you will kindly reflect upon the matter of which I have spoken. You will have ample opportunity during the four years of your college course. If you arrive at a different decision—" He paused and looked carefully at the girl. She had, undoubtedly, changed subtly since he had talked with her last.

Jerome Chantry (who had been duly presented) had said in his guarded way that he considered his uncle's ward an exceedingly handsome girl. Being a man of the world, not unacquainted with the ways of women, he had deeply deplored the indiscreet utterances of his elderly relative. Nevertheless, he expressed himself as not at all averse to the idea of a marriage with the heiress.

But neither Judge Chantry nor his sapient nephew counted upon Felice Vivian; nor upon the fact that a woman may fall romantically in love with another woman.

In the course of her college life, together with much extraneous information, Mary discovered two astonishing facts. She found that she had never yet loved any one; and also (which was far more important), that Felice Vivian was the most loving, lovable, and altogether adorable being upon earth. All of this wrought an astonishing change in Mary, and in her thoughts about nearly everything.

On her part, Miss Vivian, keenly enjoying

adoration of any and all sorts from her babyhood up, and well used to it too, regarded the tall, fair, serious Mary as a most interesting phenomenon. Her undeniable beauty, her solitary state in the world, her surprising ignorance of the commoner experiences of American girlhood impressed Miss Vivian as being altogether strange and delightful. She set herself to explore her friend's mind with the same enthusiastic interest which she would have bestowed upon the pages of a fascinating romance. And, having speedily arrived at divers decisions and opinions, she unhesitatingly undertook the formation of Mary's tastes, the moulding of her likes and dislikes, and the direction of her future course in life.

Thus, it came about that individuals whom Mary had heretofore regarded in her customary mild and large-eyed way as pseudo-providences, were promptly classified and labelled by the clever Miss Vivian as very ordinary persons indeed. Judge Chantry, for example, who had figured in Mary Adams's life as an awful and

inexorable deity, elevated upon an inaccessible Olympian peak, represented to her childish eyes by a particular large chair placed in a particular spot of the Chantry library, now promptly descended under Miss Vivian's airy supervision to a plane almost beneath notice.

"I can see very plainly, Mary, that your guardian is a cross, disagreeable old person," quoth the intelligent Felice. "I should advise you not to pay *too* much attention to him from now on. Men are so preposterously opinionated, anyway; one must always manage them. As for that widower creature, Jerome, he is *absolutely impossible*, and the idea of your being expected to marry him is absurd!"

"I shall not marry any one," declared Mary, soulfully. "I shall never love any one but you, Felice!"

Being in a secluded spot the two girls paused to kiss each other rapturously.

"You certainly are the darlingest thing in the world, Mary," murmured Miss Vivian;

"but it does seem a shame to lose all that money."

Being of a prettily practical turn of mind, Miss Vivian harked back more than once to the matter of the higher education of the native females of the Hawaiian Islands, and its too obvious relation to the Lydia Adams estate. In the intervals between lectures, recitations, and other functions of a purely scholastic nature the two girls applied themselves unremittingly to the study of this vastly interesting sociological problem, which assumed vaster and more far-reaching proportions in their youthful eyes as they contemplated it.

"There *must* be some way out of it, honey," declared Miss Vivian, energetically. "Couldn't you break that cruel will?"

Mary shook her lovely head. "I wouldn't do that even if I could," she said, positively. "I am sure Aunt Lydia intended to be very kind to me. She was so very sure every woman ought to marry—though I can't see

why, when she didn't marry. Of course she could hardly have been expected to guess what sort of a person I was going to be, and she couldn't have known about *you*, Felice!"

Miss Vivian pursed up an adorable scarlet bud of a mouth. "I wish I had been acquainted with your aunt Lydia," she observed, with a slight vindictiveness of manner; "she must have been the cleverest, most original person in the world to have thought of such a thing as *compelling* you, or any one else, to marry. Why, no woman in the whole world would ever marry, if she was compelled to."

Mary's large, clear eyes beamed a mild surprise. "Was it clever of her?" she murmured. "I have never thought of it in that way, and yet I have been told that she was very clever, indeed. She made it a point never to do anything in a commonplace way."

"What did she suppose was to become of you if all her money went to those horrid

Hawaiian females?" demanded Miss Vivian, with open irritation. "If she had been really interested in any human being beside herself, she would have thought of that."

Mary shook her head. "It is all a mystery to me," she sighed. "Perhaps she took it for granted that I would die young; or—" she added, meditatively, "she might have been afraid I would grow into a disagreeable, useless old maid, and never do any good with her money."

"*Dearest!*" cooed Miss Vivian, slipping her small brown hand into Mary's large white one, "you are everything that is beautiful and noble and *grand!* If your aunt Lydia could only have known you as I do, she would have left you everything, to do with exactly as you chose."

"If she had said that I must never, *never* marry, and that I must devote my life and all the money to the women of Hawaii— Oh, Felice, that would be a life worth living!"

"Do you know what would have happened

if she had done that?" demanded Miss Vivian, incisively.

Mary waited, large-eyed, for the oracle.

"You would have been absolutely determined to marry, and you would have adored the first man you laid eyes upon after finding it out. It would be a logical consequent, honey; don't you see? In that case the whole stream of your intelligence would have been focused upon the idea of marriage, as it is now deflected from it, and the result would have been quite as inevitable, though exactly opposite."

Mary looked hurt. "I may not be clever enough to answer you out of the psychology lecture we had this morning," she said, with dignity; "but you know, Felice, that I love you too much to ever care for any man, and besides—"

"Sweetheart!" exclaimed Miss Vivian, with instant contrition, "as if I could ever lose sight of that! If you and I could go to Hawaii together, we could build a college the way

Tennyson's Princess did, and not a man should ever set foot inside the place. You should be the glorious founder and head, and I would be the dean. Oh, *Mary!*"

The two clasped hands in speechless ecstasy before the airy splendor of this vision.

"And to think that we could do it," sighed Mary, "if only—"

"*If only!*" echoed Miss Vivian, and lifted her brown eyes in which lurked a tiny demon of mischief invisible to the serious Mary. The two girls were strolling down a quiet street of the village, bareheaded, after the college custom, though the cold spring wind whistled keenly through the budding boughs overhead. "Dearest," she went on, "we must devise some plan by which we can circumvent Aunt Lydia and—"

The somewhat singular spectacle of a tall, comfortably stout, immaculately groomed man, who was approaching them rapidly, interrupted the words which trembled upon Miss Vivian's lips. At the same instant the slight stiffening

of Mary's long neck and the look of haughty displeasure, which she turned upon the stranger, apprised the intelligent Felice of his identity.

"*Is* it the bereft Jerome?" she whispered, and preened herself ever so slightly.

"How dare he come here!" replied Mary. Her usually mild eyes seemed congealed into clearest ice; her reddish hair appeared to emit fiery sparkles of indignation.

Miss Vivian, on the contrary, dimpled sweetly when somewhat ungraciously introduced to the stranger. She was so glad to meet Mr. Chantry. Dear Mary had spoken of him often.

Mr. Chantry bent a hopefully inquiring gaze upon the clear profile which Mary turned persistently in his direction. Then he looked down into the small, dark, sparkling face uplifted to his with pleased interest.

"I am delighted to—er—know that Miss Adams has thought of me with sufficient interest to mention my name," he said, urbanely, and added, "I am frequently thinking of her."

"You are mistaken," said Mary, distinctly. "I never think of you. I do not wish to think of you."

She was looking straight ahead of her, her fine, dark brows bent above the clear, colorless gray of her eyes; hence she did not see the charming smile which Felice charitably bestowed upon the discomfited Chantry. The smile appeared to convey amused comprehension, intelligent sympathy and a vague promise of co-operation, which Mr. Chantry appropriated with mistaken gratitude.

"You will excuse me, I am sure," murmured the astute Miss Vivian, after a few moments devoted to desultory conversation, in which Mary obstinately declined to participate, "I have a lecture to prepare."

An hour later she came upon Mary sitting quite alone upon the steps of the terrace with a five-pound box of confectionery in her lap.

"Well, honey, has he gone?" she inquired, eying her friend with quite justifiable curiosity.

"Yes, and forever, I hope," said Mary, depositing the box upon the ground with a gesture of loathing. She turned suddenly, and hiding her eyes on Felice's small shoulder, burst into stormy tears. "Oh, dearest," she whispered, passionately, "I hate men—especially that man; but I do love you!"

Miss Vivian's delicate hand played about the beautiful bent head like a brown butterfly. "Sweetest!" she cooed, vaguely. Then, with a brisk little shake, "Tell me, did he propose?"

"No; but I told him that I should never marry him."

"You told him—*before he asked you?* Oh, *Mary!*"

"There was no use of my pretending that I did not understand," said Mary, haughtily. "I did understand, and I wanted him to understand. I couldn't have him coming—between —*us*, Felice!"

Miss Vivian drew a long breath. "It is quite possible that you will not always feel about me as you do now, Mary," she said,

slowly and clearly, as one would speak to a dull child. "And afterward, you know, you might be sorry and blame me because you were poor and alone in the world, when you might just as well have been rich and happy."

Mary's clear eyes overflowed with tears. "But I couldn't have him coming—between *us*," she repeated, helplessly; "and so—I told him."

Miss Vivian sprang to her feet with a vixenish little laugh. "Come in this minute, and go to work on your chemistry," she commanded. "If you will insist upon being a poverty-stricken old maid, you shall at least be a clever one!" And picking up the despised offering of bonbons, she walked briskly away.

Poor Mary, her stately head hanging like a shamed child's, followed meekly.

III

IF the truth must be told, Miss Vivian had been gradually finding out that her friendship with Mary Adams had grown into something very like an actual embarrassment. It had commenced like an ivy climbing up a wall, delicate, slight, ready to wither and die at an unfriendly touch, reaching up timid tendrils, frail as mist, yet fastening and clinging, blindly, tenaciously, almost suffocatingly. By almost imperceptible degrees she had found herself isolated, hemmed in, held unyieldingly fast by the unswerving devotion of Mary.

It was very sweet, no doubt, to have won the whole-hearted adoration of so exquisite and guileless a creature; but for her part Felice Vivian was sanely aware of the unreality (to herself she called it plainly *absurdity*) of the

relation. She recognized the fact that the whole fabric of this chilly maiden love was fashioned out of unsubstantial dream stuff, as lovely but every whit as evanescent as the frost flowers of a winter morning etched upon a pane of clear glass. She was herself already conscious of warm desires and ambitions wholly without the jealous clasp of Mary's strong, white arms.

Reasoning in a healthy, girlish fashion from cause to effect, Miss Vivian set deliberately about supplanting herself in Mary's heart. To be really in love (she argued) one must be in love with a man. In pursuance of her deep designs for Mary's ultimate well-being she invited her for a long stay at her father's country-place, and here she guilefully caused various eligible men to appear in due succession, and upon each, in turn, she conscientiously strove to impress the superlative attractions of her guest.

This altruistic endeavor was foredoomed to complete failure. Mary had never looked

more beautiful, yet in her absolute aloofness and tranquil unconsciousness of her charm, she made no more impression upon the hearts of the men than an exquisite child. They agreed with cheerful unanimity that Miss Adams was "a star," then straightway fell in love with their hostess, who was merely an adorable human being.

After a third ignominious failure of the sort, Miss Vivian unflinchingly resorted to severer measures. "Do you know, honey, I am feeling wretchedly unhappy about you," she began, with a solemnity which roused Mary to tender alarms.

"Unhappy about *me!* Oh, Felice, what have I done?" entreated Mary. "Was it because—did you think, dearest, that I talked too much to that Mr. Calthorp who was here last week? You know you were always leaving us together, and I *tried* to be polite to him for your sake."

"Oh, honey, how stu—that is, I *wanted* you to talk to him; I *wanted* you to like him!

Can't you see what a dreadful mistake you are making? Your twenty-third birthday comes next year, and unless you marry somebody before then you will lose your aunt Lydia's money, and that will mean losing me, too." She added the last words with deliberate emphasis.

"Must I lose *you?*" whispered Mary. "Oh, Felice, *why?*"

Miss Vivian steeled herself against the appealing beauty of the petitioner's eyes. "I am thinking only of what is best for you, Mary," she said, crisply. "I have felt for a long time that I am really in your way, and I don't mean to be so selfish any longer."

She paused to look at Mary's imploring face, then added, with calculating cruelty: "I am *very* fond of you, Mary, and I always shall be, but it is nonsense to suppose that we shall always live together. We couldn't, you see."

"But the college, Felice," pleaded Mary; "surely you haven't forgotten all of our plans! You know you promised to stay with me al-

ways—*always*, Felice; and we have arranged the courses of study, and how the girls are to wear gowns of pink and white and yellow and blue, instead of plain black—you *can't* have forgotten?"

Miss Vivian shrugged her slim shoulders impatiently. "It was very amusing to talk about," she admitted; "but as a matter of fact you must remember, my dear, that we could do nothing of the sort without a lot of money, and *that* you are determined not to have."

"I have thought of it all, over and over again," persisted poor Mary, winking back her tears. "I am really not so foolish as you seem to think, Felice. Even if the money goes to a board of trustees instead of to me, I see no reason why we may not carry out our plans. I wrote to my guardian and asked him if he would arrange for you to be president of the college, and for me to be dean."

"And what did Mr. Chantry say in reply?"

inquired Miss Vivian, arching her brows with a pitying smile.

"He is very sarcastic and unpleasant, as usual," sighed Mary. "Still, I haven't given up hope; we shall have to wait—for a long time, perhaps. But I shall not mind, if you won't, *darling!* This is his letter:

"'My dear Mary,—I am sorry to see that in your case the so-called higher education does not appear to have developed in the least your sense of relativity, ordinarily called common-sense. Your scheme is a very pretty one, and quite what I should have expected from you; but, unfortunately, the only way you can be sure of doing as you wish is to comply with the conditions of your aunt Lydia Adams's will. If you care to consider my advice, you will accept Jerome, who is still in the market, and, doubtless, available.

"'As for the presidency of that hypothetical college, while you would undoubtedly be able to wield considerable influence in the selection of its official head, that influence must be brought to bear upon the proper persons at the proper time and place.

"'I have the honor, madam, to remain very respectfully yours, Isaac Chantry.'"

"*Would* you consider Jerome, if he should offer himself again?" inquired Miss Vivian, after a discreet pause.

"You know that I would not," said Mary. She returned the letter to its envelope, her white hands trembling a little. Then she fixed her clear eyes upon her friend. "Are you tired of me, Felice?" she asked. "Do you want me to go away?"

These two questions quite exactly expressed what Miss Vivian was thinking at that minute. She was tired of Mary, and she wished heartily that she would go away—somewhere, anywhere,—with her embarrassing devotion and her childish, impossible plans. But she did what ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have done in like circumstances. As she looked into Mary's lovely, beseeching eyes, all the tenderness and pity of a nature which was, after all, hard only at the core—after the highly respectable pattern of a peach or a plum — welled over in murmured words and gentle caresses. She called Mary her dear

old honey-pot, her sweetest love, her dearest, dearest of darlings. She assured her (unblushingly) that she should be very, very unhappy — actually heart-broken, indeed — if parted from her Mary, and ended by offering to do her hair in a new way.

All of which soothed poor Mary into a lovely glow of happiness and gratitude, in which she appeared more than ever like a big, beautiful child.

That afternoon Mary went out by herself, "to think," she told Felice, gravely, and the latter accepted her transient release with a little shrug of mingled gratitude and pity.

The place which Mary chose as a trysting-place with her confused thoughts could hardly have been more beautiful. But neither purple seas nor the rich variety of woodland and meadow spread out under a sky of loveliest azure held any answer to the puzzling questions which appeared to demand immediate solution.

In her own peculiarly slow and illogical way,

Mary had arrived at one or two tardy conclusions. She must either marry, she told herself, or give up her plans for a college in Hawaii. Her aunt Lydia's fortune did not matter except as it linked itself with Felice. Linked with Felice, the despised legacy took on an appearance of supreme importance. She set herself to consider the hated condition attached to the bequest with a deliberation and seriousness which she had not yet brought to it. It had been indistinctly impressed upon her mind that a wife should love her husband; how this phenomenon was even remotely possible she could scarcely imagine. Men, as they had hitherto appeared to her abstracted eyes, were ugly creatures, overgrown, uncouth, awkward; their deep voices grated upon her ear; their bold eyes roused her to vague alarms and vaguer indignations. She shivered in the warm summer air as Jerome Chantry's full-fed, middle-aged, complacent visage rose before her mental vision. He appeared to bend gloatingly over her. He

was about to touch her cheek with his lips.

She sprang to her feet with a little scream of terror and hatred. Afar off in the valley at her feet a man clad in dull blues was at work among the young corn.

Mary's unhappy thoughts fluttered to this distant figure quite unawares, and hovered about it uncertainly. After a while she walked slowly down the hill. What she was thinking as she went she could not possibly have explained to herself or to any one. Her large eyes were fastened upon the blue-shirted figure. She moved steadily toward it.

Down in the valley the blue-shirted man was working busily among the springing ranks of young corn. The green blades were as yet quite small and slender, and about their roots crept various wild plants, bearing a profusion of tiny, common flowers, yellow and white and pink. The man was dislodging these gay vagrants with a light cut and thrust of his sharp hoe. Now and again he stooped to pull one

from its chosen foothold next the growing corn. He appeared determined to spare none of them, yet a curious regret clouded his keen eyes as he struck hither and yon at the tender things, the dull clink of his hoe against the loose stones making a subdued accompaniment to his thoughts, which ran musically in a single, narrow channel: "Where her delicate feet had touched the earth, green herbage flowering sprang," he repeated. He could not, for the life of him, recall the second line. There was both love and longing in it, he knew, pursuing some one, as she had pursued the flying pages of her manuscript.

"—Green herbage flowering sprang," he again repeated to himself, with a tolerant smile at his own folly, and stooped to pull a fragrant pink clover, upon which a wandering bee had settled. The man fixed his blue eyes upon it thoughtfully, the remembered vision of the slender, young figure in its rose-colored gown linking itself curiously with the flower and its eager bee.

No one save a poet could possibly have thought the thoughts the blue-shirted man was thinking while Mary was walking slowly toward him across the fields, not knowing whither she was going, nor yet why she went. No one save a gentleman (in the primal, unspoiled meaning of the word) could have watched her approach with prophetic eyes which seemed to see beyond the present into the long vistas of past and future.

IV

F thoughts are winged things, more mysteriously alive, more subtly powerful than any exploited energy in the universe, then the action of the girl who was coming toward the man needs little explanation. She was coming to him as the bee had flown to its clover.

He saw her when she was yet a little way off, and waited quietly for her approach. It seemed to him he had known all along that she would come, that he had already watched her unnumbered times coming to him across the fields, her rich beauty glowing flower-like against the soberer tones of earth and sky. She was a part of his landscape, as the great, white, deep-bosomed clouds were a part of the July heavens. She belonged to him as the bee belonged to its clover.

As for Mary, she was wondering confusedly why she had come. And, still wondering, she drew yet nearer and looked up into his face.

"You wanted me?" he asked, confidently.

"Yes," she answered.

He waited for her to speak further; then, seeing that her face was clouded and tremulous like a child's on the verge of tears, he said, very gently, yet with the authority of a strong man: "Tell me what troubles you. Come, we will sit down under the tree yonder."

"How can I tell you?" she said. Then, forlornly, "You could not help me."

"Yes," he said, "I can help you. That is why you came to me. . . . I can help you, and I will."

She remained silent for a time, under the shelter of the wide-spreading oak which cast tremulous green shadows on her face and dress. Watching her unobtrusively, he saw the painful swelling of her white throat and the unshed tears shining on her lashes. The sight roused him to vague anger. Involun-

tarily his sinewy brown hands clinched themselves.

Her eyes turned to him at last. "If I only knew you," she murmured. "You look so strong—and—kind."

"In reality," he answered, "you do know me."

His eyes held hers for a long minute.

"Now you shall tell me what troubles you," he finished, quietly.

"It is not"—she hesitated—"like any other trouble in the world. It is about Felice."

"You mean Miss Vivian?"

"Yes." She sighed, and looked away from him across the fields. "I love her," she added, simply.

"And doesn't she love you?" he asked, with a slow smile.

"Oh yes; she loves me as much as I love her. But—"

He waited patiently for her to go on.

"I haven't anything to build a college with except Aunt Lydia's money," she said. "And I can't have that unless—"

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," he said, with careful politeness. "Who is Aunt Lydia?"

"Aunt Lydia has been dead for fifteen years," she told him. "She left all her money to me—to do as I liked with, if I—"

"Would do as she liked?"

"How did you guess it? Aunt Lydia was never married; but she believed every woman should marry. She said that unless I—that I must—"

"She said that you must marry or lose the money?"

"Who told you about it?"

"No one. I guessed it. Or perhaps your thoughts came to me before you did."

"How can thoughts go anywhere?"

He shook his head gravely. "I can't tell you that," he said; "but they do, sometimes; especially when one is thinking intently about another person."

"And—were you thinking about me?"

"I was thinking of you as you came across

the field. I had been thinking of you as I worked."

She was silent, gravely considering his reply. "Well, then, if you know about Felice and about me and about Aunt Lydia's will, what ought I to do?"

He blushed stealthily under all his tan. "I don't think I understand about Miss Vivian," he said, at last; "what has she to do with this?"

Mary flashed an astonished glance at him. "If my thoughts had really come to you," she said, "you would have known that Felice is the only person in the world I have ever loved." Then her eyes clouded with fear and regret. "Felice says that I ought to marry somebody, so that I can have Aunt Lydia's money to build a college in Hawaiia with. Aunt Lydia was interested in Hawaii and if I—if I don't have the money, it is all to go to build a college for women there. But Felice and I—if we had the money—we would build the college, and stay together always.

We promised, you know, and—and it would break my heart to leave her."

He trembled a little under the impact of a sudden wild desire.

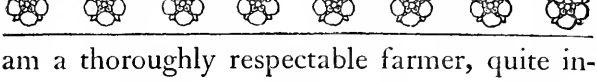
"I don't care at all for the money," she was saying, sadly. "I can work and earn all that I need. I care only for Felice—and for all that we have planned to do together."

She glanced at him doubtfully. "I wonder why I have told you this—I ought not to have told any one."

"On the contrary," he said, "you have told me because I am, perhaps, the only person in the world who can help you." He drew a deep breath. "There is only one thing wanting to put everything right," he went on deliberately; "you must marry—me."

She shrank away from him, as if frightened at his bold suggestion. "Oh no," she said, faintly, "I couldn't do that. I shall never marry any one."

"Miss Vivian knows who I am," he went on, thoughtfully—"at least, her father does. I



am a thoroughly respectable farmer, quite independent of any one's opinion, and free to do as I please. And I shall be glad to serve you in this difficult matter of the will—in the only way that a man can serve you effectually, and I ask nothing—in return."

She was looking at him doubtfully. "Do you mean that you would stay here, and let me go away with Felice and build the college?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But—would I be obliged to wear a wedding-ring and—be called by your name? I—I don't even know your name."

"My name," he told her, gravely, "is Hugh Ghent. You may leave the ring in my keeping and bear the name that pleases you best."

"Why," she asked, after a long silence, "do you wish to do this for me?"

"I shall, perhaps, tell you when you have asked me for the third time," he said, his blue eyes meeting hers steadily. "At present—you would not be interested to know."

"But if I do not ask you a second time?"

"I shall never tell you."

She pondered his reply in puzzled silence. "After all," she said, "it makes no difference. You will — marry me, and you will expect nothing from me? You said that you would ask nothing?"

"I said that I would ask nothing. If I am ever to receive anything at your hands it will be because you give it to me of your own free will."

"I could give you — money," she said, meditatively. Then drew back frightened before the sudden blaze of anger in his eyes.

"A man," he said, "does not accept money from the woman he— Do not say that to me again, Mary."

"I will not," she promised, breathlessly. "But—would it be—right and—kind for me to—to go away and have everything I wanted, and leave you here without anything? I should want to be sure that you—that I—

I could never leave Felice. You must understand that," she finished.

"I understand," he assured her, patiently. "You will marry me merely to secure your fortune. I shall be no worse for the transaction, and you will be infinitely better off. It is quite simple; is it not? Any man ought to be willing to perform so slight a service for a woman."

She eyed him questioningly. "It *sounds* like a small thing to do," she admitted; "but I am afraid it isn't, really. And Felice will scold me—or laugh. She often laughs at me; and I think she supposes that I do not know it. But I do."

He smiled.

"And now you are laughing at me!" she cried, indignantly.

"But *I* do not matter," he reminded her. "You do not care what I think."

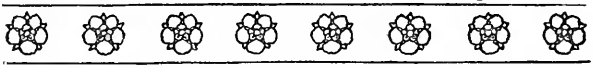
"No," she agreed, "there is really no reason why I should care what you think, and yet—" She gazed at him with a child's frank

curiosity. "I can't help wondering why you are so—so kind to me, and that makes me care a little. And — and it was really very odd, when one stops to think of it, that I should have asked you—I mean that I should have told you—not knowing you—not even knowing your name. You said you were thinking about me when you saw me coming? Why should you have thought about me at all?"

"I will tell you some time," he said; "but first I should like to know why you came. You were coming to speak to me?"

She shook her head. "I was thinking of how I dislike men," she said, simply, "particularly one man; and, as I was thinking, I just walked along, and presently I saw you. I didn't mean to speak to you."

His eyes shone with a sudden splendor of blue light. "I was thinking of how, where your delicate feet had touched the earth, green herbage flowering sprang," he said, in a low, shaken voice. "I disliked to cut out the



weeds—they are really flowers—yet it had to be done."

She was looking sweetly puzzled. "Oh!" she said, at last, "you remembered my quotation from Hesiod's "Theogony." It was Aphrodite whose delicate feet touched the earth, not mine."

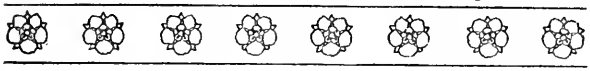
"And what was it that tracked her steps?" he entreated. "I haven't been able to recall the second line."

"'Love tracked her steps,'" quoted Mary, softly, "'and enchanted Longing pressed hard after.'" Then, for the first time in her life, she blushed divinely.

He waited till the exquisite aurora had faded, half averting his eyes, as if the sight of it were too holy for the eyes of a man.

"I—I must be going," stammered Mary, a new and painful self-consciousness tingling her downcast face. "Felice will be wondering what has become of me."

"Stay with me a moment more," he begged. "You will always be with Felice after this,



and I, you know, shall be here. There is the marriage to be spoken of. The sooner it is over the better for you, and for me it does not matter."

He drew a little farther away, and his voice steadied to its usual calm, even monotone. "I will make all necessary arrangements at once, and to-morrow— Will to-morrow be too soon?"

"No." Mary's lips formed the monosyllable faintly. "Must I tell Felice?" she asked.

"Why, certainly," he answered, coolly; "Miss Vivian is the one chiefly concerned in the matter, I should say. Bring her with you to-morrow; I will provide a second witness."

"And if—if I should— Oh, I don't know what Felice will say! I am afraid I have done a very—"

"It is all quite right," he said, with no hint of anything save strong kindness in his tone. "It isn't usual, I'll admit; I have asked you to marry me simply to extricate you from a very unpleasant dilemma, and you have, very

wisely, decided to accept my service. It will all be over in a matter of half an hour, and then you will be quite free to follow your own wishes. That is all there is to it."

She drew a deep breath. "Put in that way," she murmured, "it sounds very—very—"

"Very matter of fact," he finished for her. He was watching her carefully as he spoke. "You may put it to Miss Vivian in just that way. She will, of course, make such inquiries as seem best with regard to my general character and eligibility — by that I mean my freedom from any previous matrimonial bond. It will be quite legal and regular, I assure you. Your guardian will be perfectly satisfied that the conditions of the will have been met."

She was looking at him with a new anxiety. "I forgot," she said, "that after this—this marriage, you will not be free any longer. Suppose you should—" She paused, obviously searching for the right words.

He waited patiently for the end of her halting sentence.

"If you should—sometime—wish to marry some one else—some one you could love and who loved you—what would you do?"

"I will let you know when that time arrives," he told her, gravely. "In the mean time do not give yourself the slightest uneasiness with regard to it. That, you will remember, is my affair."

"Then I do not have to think about you at all!" She spoke with an air of mingled relief and resentment. "And you—you will not be obliged to think of me again."

"You have put it precisely," he said, cheerfully. "I beg that you will not—after tomorrow—think of me again, and I—"

"I shall think of you if I choose," she cried. "Why should I not think of you? I shall be forced to think of you when I am—very happy, with Felice, you know; because it will be to you that I owe it all. It would be very ungrateful of me never to think of you. Of course it will be different with you. There will be no reason why you should think of me, unless you—"

Again he waited imperturbably for the conclusion of her remark, and, when it was not forthcoming, he smiled a little, then sighed. She had turned her back upon him, and was walking slowly away.

"I forgot," she said, presently, without turning her head, "to ask you at what time you—I mean when shall we—"

"It must be at noon," he said, meditatively, "when the shadows are under foot. Yes, let it be at this time to-morrow. And the place? It shall be wherever you please."

She gazed about her with wide, gray eyes—at the blue sea, veiled in purest violet, where the sky stooped to clasp it; at the distant dunes shining in the sun; at the peaceful undulations of field and meadow, and the young corn springing at her feet. "Why should it not be here?" she stammered.

He bared his head to the strong sunlight. "It shall be—here," he said.

V

HEN Mary opened her eyes on the morning of her wedding-day, it was like no other awakening she could remember. Her first thought was of Hugh Ghent, as he had stood with bared head among the young blades of springing corn.

"'It must be at noon,'" he had said, "'when the shadows are under foot!'" She lay quite still, gazing out of her open window over wide stretches of purple sea, rising and falling in long, even swells under the pink dawn. "'When the shadows are under foot,'" she murmured to herself, and wondered dreamily what he had meant by the words. His strong-featured face, with its keen, blue eyes, seemed still to be gazing at her, calmly, seriously, but with exceeding kindness.

It occurred to her presently that she had not yet told Felice of her plans for the day. She had listened in silence to Felice arranging a morning expedition to a neighboring village. "I cannot go," she had objected, briefly. But when pressed for a reason she had found no words of explanation.

She arose when the first long, level ray of sunlight flashed across the ocean, and, slipping into a white wrapper, stole noiselessly across the corridor to her friend's room.

Felice lay upon her pillow soundly asleep, one brown, dimpled hand tucked under her cheek, the other lying outside the white coverlet, half closed, yet relaxed, like the innocent hand of a little child.

Mary drew near like a benignant angel, and stood by the bedside gazing down at the sleeper. How beautiful Felice was (she thought), with her long lashes shadowing the smooth, flushed oval of her cheek, her parted lips wistful with dreams, her curling, dark

hair spread over the surrounding whiteness in charming disorder.

"Darling!" murmured Mary, her clear eyes overflowing with exquisite maternal passion, not the less real in that she was ignorant of its true nature.

The sleeper stirred a little under the steady light of those adoring eyes.

"Felice!" whispered Mary, and sank to her knes by the bedside.

The sleeper's curling lashes trembled, then flew wide.

"Felice—dear! This is my wedding-day. I came to tell you. Aren't you glad, dear—aren't you *glad?*"

Miss Vivian rubbed the dreams from her dark eyes, yawned petulantly, sighed, then put out a small, protesting hand.

"Why, *Mary*—what in the world are you doing, awake at this hour? It can't be—no, it isn't more than four o'clock! Do go to bed, there's a good child, and let me sleep. It's—why, it's inhuman to wake a person at this hour of the day!"

"I only wanted to tell you that this is my wedding-day," began Mary, apologetically. "I couldn't sleep, and so—"

"Your *what?*" Miss Vivian sat up with a dainty shriek of dismay.

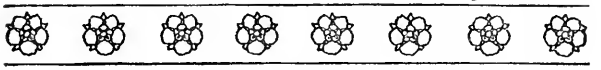
"My wedding-day," repeated Mary, gently. "I ought to have told you yesterday that I was to be married to-day; but—somehow, I couldn't. Aren't you glad, dear? I shall never have to leave you again."

Miss Vivian was thoroughly awake now. She pulled Mary toward her. "No, you aren't feverish," she decided. "But you're talking in your sleep. Go back to bed, honey, do, and finish your dreams like a civilized person!"

"I'll go away, if you like, Felice; but it's quite true; I am to marry Hugh Ghent at noon to-day. He was very kind to me—though I can't think why."

"*Kind! Hugh Ghent! At noon to-day!*"

"Hush, dear!" urged Mary, soothingly. "It's nothing to be excited over. But don't



you see, Felice, it solves everything for *us*. It is what you have been entreating me to do all along. But I couldn't see how—"

"Mary," said Miss Vivian, severely, "I confess my beclouded intellect is unable to follow you. *Who* is Hugh Ghent, and when and where did you meet him? I don't know any such person, unless you mean— Oh, Mary, you can't mean that farmer person who persists in refusing to part with his ancestral acres at any price. Father has been at loggerheads with him for years. You *can't* mean him!"

"It must be the same person, I think," said Mary, meditatively; "though I know nothing about his affairs. He said he was a farmer, and he said, too, that you would know him."

Miss Vivian stared at her friend fixedly. "Mary," she said, after a prolonged scrutiny, which the other bore meekly—"Mary, did you ask that man to marry you?"

"No, Felice; he asked me."

"How long have you known him?"

"I— Why, I don't know him at all," replied Mary, candidly. "It isn't necessary, though. It is all quite right—quite regular and proper." Her eyes brightened as she recalled his words. "He said that I was to tell you so. It was very nice of him; don't you think so, dear?"

"*Nice!*" repeated Miss Vivian, blankly.

"Don't you see, dearest, that all will come right now—everything that has troubled us? We can build the college, and—and— Aren't you glad? Oh, Felice!"

Miss Vivian was staring into space, her dark brows knit forbiddingly, her small mouth drawn into a scarlet bud. When she spoke it was with business-like coldness and brevity. "I think," she said, "that I begin to understand. You told this man about your affairs, and he offered to marry you out of hand. What does he expect in return?"

"He expects nothing—*nothing!*" cried Mary. "He said so. He said that—that it was a service any man would be willing to perform

for a woman." The girl's voice sank almost to a whisper as she added: "I couldn't help but think of one of those knights of the Round Table epoch, Felice, for all he was wearing a blue shirt and overalls—I think it was overalls—they were tucked into high boots, I remember. He will not separate us, Felice, nor come between us—ever. *He promised!*"

Miss Vivian was eying her friend thoughtfully from under her long lashes. "Perhaps he is after your money," she said, deliberately. "Did you tell him about the money?"

"*Felice!*" cried Mary. Her tone conveyed strong indignation, almost anger. Her eyes darkened curiously.

"Did you, honey?" persisted Miss Vivian, sweetly.

"I told him—everything. He understands—about the money and the college, and about you, Felice."

"What did you tell him about me?"

"I told him that you were the only person I had ever loved, or ever could love," breathed

Mary. "He—he *understands*. You needn't be afraid, Felice."

Miss Vivian graciously permitted herself to be drawn into strong, white arms; her scarlet mouth dimpled mischievously under Mary's rose-leaf kisses. She was thinking of many things which would have been quite unintelligible to Mary, and which, therefore, she did not see fit to put into words.

"Have you invited your guardian to the wedding?" Miss Vivian asked, after a pause filled with soft, enraptured murmurs, like those of a brooding dove.

"No, dear," said Mary, tranquilly; "I only knew it myself yesterday."

"Where is it to be, please?"

"In the corn-field."

"*Mary!*"

"Why not? It isn't like an ordinary wedding, you know, and I shouldn't want it to be in the church—nor in the house—nor in some dusty office."

"A dusty office would be far more suitable

for such a wedding, I should say," commented Miss Vivian, with some asperity; "but a *cornfield!* Go and dress, Mary, and I will call mother and tell her. It must be here, of course, in the drawing-room. I am sure that would lend an air of respectability to the affair."

Mary drew her tall figure to its fullest height. "Please remember that this is my wedding, Felice," she said, mildly, "and I—we have quite decided that it shall be out-of-doors. It will not be necessary for you to tell any one till it is over."

"I suppose the farmer person suggested the cornfield?"

"No, Felice; he asked me where it should be, and I—I thought—"

For the second time in her life a tide of rosy color rolled gloriously over Mary's fair face. She was thinking confusedly of the lines from Hesiod, and of the flowering weeds in the cornfield which he had told her he disliked to disturb. "There are flowers there," she added, dreamily.

Miss Vivian observed this singular phenomenon in discreet silence. "Very well," she acquiesced, cheerfully, "I will tell no one, and it shall be just as you and the—er—happy bridegroom have arranged."

Mary looked troubled. "I want to ask you something, Felice," she said. "He told me that this was his affair, and that I was not to think of it—nor of him—ever again—after to-day. But I can't help thinking about him, and that it might make him very unhappy sometime—this marriage, I mean; don't you think it might, Felice?—if he—if he should wish to marry—really marry—some one else. It doesn't seem quite fair for me to have everything and go away—I shall have *you*, Felice, and all the money, and he will have nothing."

"He can easily get a divorce," murmured Miss Vivian, smothering a yawn, "and I dare say he will do so at his first opportunity. I'm sure I should if I were in his place."

Mary stared at her with wide, astonished eyes. "Oh no," she said, in a low voice,

"you are mistaken, Felice, he would never do that—never!"

Miss Vivian shrugged her slim shoulders. "Go away, honey, do!" she begged. "Can't you see that I'm dying for another nap?—and it's ages yet before breakfast-time?"

Mary stooped over the little figure on the bed with a sudden passion of emotion. "I'm doing it for you, Felice," she whispered, "only for you!"

Then she turned and went away as she was bidden, her voluminous white draperies sweeping the floor with the soft, perfumed rush of a summer breeze.

VI

DR. VIVIAN was engaged in examining his mail in the library of his villa, with every token of that settled leisure which he was conscious of having fairly earned by a previous period of strenuous professional activity, when he looked up to behold his daughter standing in the doorway.

"Are you busy, daddy?" inquired the apparition, sweetly.

"Never too busy to listen to you, daughter," replied the doctor, with a twinkle of fine humor in his eyes. "What is it this morning, little one?"

"Oh, nothing in particular," prevaricated Miss Vivian, with a charming display of white teeth and dimples. "Why should there be? But you know, daddy dear, I so seldom

get a chance to have you all to myself nowadays."

"I have a tremendous rival in Mary, I am aware," admitted the doctor, gravely; "but I try to endure it. What is your programme for to-day?"

Miss Vivian pouted. "Do you know," she complained, confidentially, "I think Mary is positively tiresome — sometimes. Fancy her waking me out of a sound sleep at four this morning to tell me—how much she loved me! How should you like that, daddy?"

"Well," said Dr. Vivian, screwing up his face into a humorous frown, "I expect I should suffer excruciatingly under such circumstances —as I see you have, daughter. But I fancy Mary will come across somebody some of these days who will be big enough and strong enough to bear up under all the love she can give him, and—like as not—ask for more."

"I'm sure I hope so," Felice wished, devoutly.

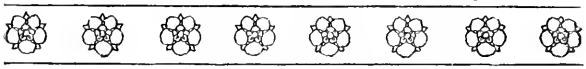
With this as a simple introduction, she

adroitly conducted the conversation by way of the new shrubberies, the hot-houses, the stables, pausing artfully at the gardens to inquire with well-simulated anxiety after some young fruit-trees which had been lately put out.

Dr. Vivian fell into the trap with ease. "We haven't the right soil for fruit," he began, argumentatively, as he pushed his mail aside and laced his fingers across his capacious waistcoat front. "Now, for the successful culture of fruit you must have—"

Here Felice's more piquant maiden meditations happily intervened to occupy her mind during the quarter of an hour or more that her father's rumbling voice was learnedly discoursing upon soils, fertilizers, drainage, pruning, and grafting as opposed to budding, though to the unobservant, paternal eye she was all the while paying the sweetest and most dutiful attention.

"If I could only persuade that stubborn blockhead Ghent to sell me a few acres of



his pasture-land," finished the doctor, bringing down his broad hand with much unnecessary force upon his broad knee; "but one might as well try to buy property from the man in the moon."

"One would think a man in his position would want the money," murmured Felice, with intelligent sympathy. "He must be a very coarse, ignorant sort of a person."

"Ghent? Oh no; he's an uncommonly intelligent, well-educated fellow, as far as that goes, but a curious duffer as ever lived."

The doctor chuckled reminiscently.

"What does he do that is so queer, daddy?" inquired Felice, with a pretty, interested air of making conversation.

"Oh, nothing in particular; that is, nothing that would interest you, daughter. He's merely an unworldly, impractical, visionary sort, capable of being and doing almost anything, but wrapped up in his notions like a moth in a cocoon. Why, Ghent is the sort of fellow who would leave a quarter of an

acre of prime meadow-grass uncut because there happened to be a ground-sparrow's nest in the middle of it. Fact! he did that very thing this summer! And Peters assures me that last fall he left bushels of nuts under the trees, and standing corn along the fences, for the squirrels and woodchucks. I don't take much stock in that sort of thing myself."

Felice considered these singular characteristics of the farmer person with her pretty head tilted thoughtfully to one side. "That all sounds rather nice to me," she observed, at length. "And as for his being odd—there are plenty of odd people in the world. I should think," she added, with innocent afterthought, "that his wife might persuade him to be more sensible and—and thrifty; she looks a plain, hard-working sort of person. I've noticed her picking vegetables in the garden."

"Ghent isn't married; the woman you've seen is his house-keeper. Permelia McIl-

heny is quite another sort. Her father has been right-hand man about the place since Ghent was a lad. I fancy the old chap thinks he owns the farm by now. I declare, I believe if I could convince old Andrew that they didn't need that strip of pasture as much as I do, perhaps I'd get it!"

"Did you say that Mr. Ghent was a widower?" inquired Felice, with a smothered yawn. "Indeed, he must be—very queer, and—"

The doctor turned a waggish eye upon his cross-questioner. "Preserved game getting shy — eh, daughter?" he inquired, gravely. "Ghent is a bachelor; but let me advise you not to attempt a flirtation with him. He might clap you under his microscope to see what sort of an odd butterfly he'd captured."

Miss Vivian put up a disdainful little chin. "Don't be silly, daddy," she advised, piquantly; "I'm not interested in persons of that sort. I simply asked a few questions about this farmer person to—to pass away the time, and because, daddy dear, I've heard you mention

him so many times in connection with the gardens."

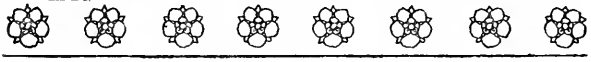
"Well, he's a curious duffer—no doubt of that," grumbled the doctor, submitting to an airy kiss upon the top of his bald head as he turned to his neglected mail.

Having salved her uneasy conscience by means of this casual interview, the astute Miss Vivian went in search of the bride.

She found Mary, attired in a cool, white linen, seated in a veranda chair doing nothing at all. Mary's large, finely modelled hands seemed incapable of any of the small, intricate employments usual to women. She had never been known to embroider or to crochet, and her few blundering attempts at needle-work had sufficed to include it among the lost arts, as far as she was concerned.

"Oh, honey! aren't you excited?" demanded Miss Vivian, with anxious curiosity. "Way down inside, I mean? Outwardly you're as unruffled and sweet as a flower."

Mary withdrew her abstracted eyes from



the blue rim of the ocean, and turned them upon her friend. "Why should I be excited, Felice?" she inquired, mildly. "I am certainly very happy to think our problems have been so easily solved. And I've been wondering, dearest, if it wouldn't be best, after all, to have the girls wear pure white. They're used to it, you know, and it's most becoming with their creamy yellow skins."

"What are you talking about?"

Mary looked surprised and a trifle hurt. "I was thinking of our Hawaiian students, Felice. What else should I be thinking of? There will be nothing to prevent our going to work at once upon our plans. We could start to-day, Felice—this very afternoon!"

"We couldn't possibly do anything of the sort, Mary," objected Miss Vivian, crisply. "You will be obliged to acquaint your guardian with the fact of your marriage, and then there will be a lot of legal business to be gone through with before you can touch your money."

"I know, Felice; but we might go to Boston this afternoon and engage an architect to begin the plans for the buildings. Oh, let us go to-day — please, Felice! I don't think I should like to stay here after— I—I couldn't, you know."

"Are you afraid of Mr. Ghent?" inquired Felice, gravely, with certain acute qualms of her hastily placated conscience. "Because, if you are, I should advise you to give up the affair at once. It isn't too late. I can send Peters down to the farm with a note saying you've changed your mind."

"But I haven't changed my mind," said Mary, slowly. "And—I'm not afraid of Mr. Ghent."

"What are you afraid of, then?"

Mary made no reply, and after a discreet interval Miss Vivian added: "I think I ought to tell daddy. He could advise you far better than I."

Mary's gray eyes swept the small figure of her friend with calm displeasure. "If I had

wished for advice, Felice, I should have asked for it. I am doing what is for the best; I am sure of that."

"But you said this morning that you were doing this all for me," persisted Miss Vivian, with an air of guilty reserve. "It makes me very uncomfortable to think of your taking such a tremendously important step for me. If—if anything should happen, it would seem to be all my fault; and, Mary—please pay attention—I am perfectly sure you won't always like me as well as you think you do now. And then—"

"Nothing will happen," chimed in Mary, sweetly. "It is all quite simple. We will go away directly, and oh, Felice, how happy and useful our lives will be! Have you realized it, dear? Everything will be beautiful about us—the great marble buildings—I hope we can afford marble—and the tropical gardens. Did you ever see a real tropical garden, Felice?—with palms and roses everywhere, and fountains springing among the green, or

running down the terraces into clear, lily-covered pools. The Hawaiian girls are the prettiest creatures in the world, so docile and affectionate and easily led. I don't wonder Aunt Lydia was interested in them. I hope we shall live to be old, Felice—perhaps as old as fifty or sixty—and then, after we are dead, we will be buried side by side in a beautiful chapel, which I shall build very near the college-hall. Our statues shall stand under the dome, not lying down, stark and stiff, but standing up *together*, just as if we were alive. And you shall be smiling, as you are now, Felice. You are so beautiful when you smile."

Miss Vivian's smile widened into irrepressible ripples of helpless laughter. "Oh, Mary, honey!" she sighed, and laughed and sighed again. "I didn't know you could be so eloquent. I'm just crazy to be carved on a sarcophagus; but how did you ever guess it?"

Then she glanced at her watch, her face growing suddenly grave. "It is nearly noon,"

she murmured. "Do let me send Peters with a note!"

Mary arose. "We will go directly," she said.

"Wait just a minute," begged Felice, struck by a sudden thought. She came back presently, flushed and breathless and laden with roses. "A wedding without flowers would be too absurd!" she twittered, nervously. "You must have roses, Mary—white ones—and I shall carry pink ones; that much, at least, shall be like other weddings."

Mary submitted in tranquil silence, while Felice's small hands fluttered about her, fastening clusters of creamy buds among the red-brown braids of her hair, and over her calmly beating heart.

VII

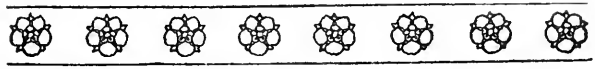
THE two girls crossed the lawn in haste, their fresh white frocks brushing the turf with a crisp flutter.

"Where is the man?" inquired Miss Vivian of her silent companion. "I should think" (reproachfully) "you might have suggested that he send a cart, at the least. I shall ruin my shoes, and so will you, honey."

"He won't mind that," murmured Mary, abstractedly. Her gray eyes appeared to radiate a mysterious light; her usually pale face was suffused with delicate color.

"Of course not," agreed Miss Vivian, with a rueful little laugh. "He'll be thinking of other things."

She stopped short, overwhelmed by a sudden realizing sense of what her friend was about



to do. "Oh, Mary," she entreated; "do wait a minute, till we've had a chance to think. I just know we ought to go back and tell daddy —or *some one. Please, honey!*"

Mary walked steadily on. She did not appear to have heard Miss Vivian's tardy protest.

"Oh, if you're determined!" murmured Felice, on the verge of hysterical tears, "*I* can't help it—or, for that matter, daddy, or any one else. It will just have to go on. But I wash my hands of it! Aren't you listening, Mary?"

Apparently Mary was not; for she vouchsafed no reply, and Miss Vivian observed that she quickened her pace.

"*Remember*—you're *not* doing this for *me!* I won't *allow* it! *Mary!*" Felice gathered up her dainty skirts and ran hastily after the slim, white vision, which seemed to have been mysteriously translated into another world, wherein the sights and sounds of earth were not apparent. "Pick up your gown, honey, do!" she urged, "if you *will* marry that farmer

person — in spite of everything. Oh, Mary, isn't that he? Yes, it is!"

Miss Vivian's anxious eyes had lighted upon a tall, athletic figure, clad unpretentiously in brown tweeds, which awaited their approach at the edge of the meadow. "Really, he doesn't look so very queer and impossible, after all," she whispered. "Why, honey" (with an air of strong relief), "he's actually good-looking!"

She drew back with becoming bridesmaidenly subserviency to watch the fateful meeting between the two, and was rewarded by the look in the farmer person's blue eyes as they fell upon Mary.

"He was afraid she wouldn't come," commented Miss Vivian.

"I understand everything *now!*" murmured the sagacious observer later, as the two walked away side by side, without so much as a fleeting glance in her direction. "They have fallen crazily in love with each other; but Mary, poor dear, doesn't even suspect it!"

"I was beginning to think you had changed your mind," he was saying to the tall, silent girl at his side.

"No," she said, in a low, tremulous voice, "I did not even think of changing my mind. But I am afraid—"

"Of me?" he asked, gently, bending his head to look searchingly into her face.

"No, not of you."

"Of yourself, then," he persisted. "Would you prefer to postpone this—or call it off altogether? It can be done now, you know."

Mary looked up at him with the clear eyes of a candid child. "Oh!" she murmured, "I am afraid it isn't fair to you. If you are going to be sorry, please say so before it is too late!"

His eyes held hers for a long minute of silence. "We will go on," he said.

They had reached the cornfield now, and Mary glanced wonderingly at the pathway of evergreen twigs which covered the brown earth with a thick, soft carpet. This aisle of

fragrant greenery led straight through the field to where a group of giant pines, strangely spared through generations of wood-cutters, cast a circle of cool shadow in the midst of the brilliant expanse of shimmering young corn.

All about the stony margin of this remnant of the virgin forest wild roses had sprung up and flourished exceedingly. These were pink with the eager bloom of the New England mid-summer, and above them swarms of butterflies, yellow and white, hovered and settled amorously in the brooding heat of the July noon. Afar off in the distant fields meadow-larks were calling to one another with wild sweetness.

"I think I ought to tell you that I have never been to a wedding before," said Mary, in a small, weak voice.

"Nor I," he confessed, with a reassuring smile. "But this will be a very simple affair, and soon over."

It was cool and dark within the solemn aisles

of the pine grove. "Like a church," Mary thought, confusedly. The wind shook spicy gusts of fragrance from the great boughs overhead and from ranks of lilies, uprising like burning lamps of white and gold on either side of a sylvan altar, behind which waited a spare, black-garbed, authoritative figure.

There followed a sonorous murmur of prayer and benediction. Then, questions, simple and few, after the manner of the dissenting Puritans of the North country:

"Hugh, do you take this woman to be your wedded wife? Do you promise to love her, to cherish her, and, forsaking all others, to keep her till by death you are parted?"

And the man answered "I do!" his voice solemn, yet full of a wondering joy.

The mild, spectacled gaze of the minister turned upon the girl.

"Mary, do you take this man to be your wedded husband? Do you promise to love him, to cherish him, and, forsaking all others, to keep him till by death you are parted?"

Hugh Ghent felt the frightened start and flutter of the hand that rested in his clasp. "I—" She faltered breathlessly, and was silent.

The words of the service flowed smoothly on, the officiating clergyman being benignantly accustomed to timid and voiceless brides. The ring was slipped into its appointed place on the bride's white hand, the final prayers and benedictions were said, and they two were made one, according to laws divine and man-made.

Then presently Mary found herself listening to stereotyped words of congratulation uttered by the smiling clergyman. "Pray permit me to tender you both my most hearty felicitations on this—er—auspicious occasion. You have certainly chosen a most beautiful spot in which to exchange your marriage vows with your husband, Mrs. Ghent; we should ever remember that the woods were God's first temples, reared before the hand of man—er—constructed the first house of worship

made with visible means, so to speak. May I ask, madam, if you contemplate residing permanently in this section of the country? If so, I shall hope to number you among my congregation."

"I do not expect to stay here—after to-day," began Mary, in a tremulous but determined voice. "And I think—I am sure—I ought to tell you that I never went to a wedding before, and I didn't understand that I—"

"Be quiet, honey, for Heaven's sake!" murmured Felice Vivian, clasping her friend with oracular foresight. "It won't do any good to explain now, and it 'll make a heap of trouble!"

"But, Felice, did you hear what he asked me to promise?" demurred the bride. "I couldn't let him suppose that I—"

"I know, Mary; but never mind now. It wouldn't be fair to *him*. Look, he is waiting to present some people to you. Just keep cool, honey; it's almost over."

"These are my best and life-long friends,

Mary," Hugh Ghent was saying in his deep, pleasant voice. "They will be as faithfully yours, if you will let them."

She turned to look into the faces of an elderly man and a middle-aged woman, who were gazing at her gravely, their eyes eloquent with unuttered questions. Andrew McIlheny was a small, stoop-shouldered old man, with a face which reminded Mary vaguely of a pictured prophet, framed as it was in a profusion of snowy hair and beard. There was an air of solemn authority about his thin, aquiline features, and shrewd, deep-set eyes quite in keeping with the character.

"This came as a great surprise to us, ma'am," he was saying, slowly, "as you must know. I had thought to be acquaintit wi' Maister Hugh's wife from her youth up. But, nevertheless, I wish you joy, Mistress Ghent."

Mary caught the inflection of mild rebuke in his words, and the color mounted to her soft cheeks. "Oh," she faltered, penitently, "I am—sorry!"

"Father only means that we should like to have known you better before you came so near to us," put in the woman, her rich contralto tones breaking upon the ear with a certain surprise.

Mary's troubled eyes turned to her kind, plain face with the instinctive appeal of woman to woman. "You don't understand, of course," she said, helplessly. "But I—"

She was interrupted in the midst of her halting speech by a masterful hand which drew her abruptly aside. "We are all going to the house now, Permelia," he said to the woman; "my wife will speak to you there. Take the others away, will you?"

Then, somehow, they were alone in the pine woods.

"This is my day, Mary," he said, after a silence which to Mary seemed filled with the strangely loud beating of her heart. "My one day. Will you do as I ask—for just this once?"

Mary gazed at him helplessly. "I—didn't

understand what it was like to be married," she murmured. "I couldn't have done it if I had known. And you—you *promised*. How could you?"

"I promised—yes." His eyes were searching her exquisite, troubled face. "But you did not promise, Mary; there is no lie between us."

"What—do you mean?" she faltered. "I—I am afraid I—don't understand."

He did not answer, and after a little she went on, a piteous tremor in her voice.

"I must explain to that man—that clergyman, and the others. It isn't fair to you! Oh, what must you think of me for consenting to such a thing—for speaking to you at all of my troubles!"

"Mary," he said, gently, "will you listen to me? You know we talked this over—this matter of the marriage, I mean—and I said to you that it was a small service for a man to do for a woman. I meant that, Mary, and nothing has occurred to change it. Everything

shall be just as we arranged it yesterday. But I want you to give me—out of your whole life, Mary—this one day. I want you to enter my home, and eat one meal at my table, and look at the sea and the hills out of my windows. Then you shall go away with your friend, and I will explain everything that needs explanation. Will you do this for me?"

She was still gazing at him with her large, clear eyes, so like the eyes of an innocent, candid child, he was reminded afresh.

"You want me—just for this one day—to be like your wife—is that what you mean?"

"I should like you to be my guest to-day," he corrected her, quietly. "I shall ask nothing from you as my wife—nothing."

She looked down at her hand upon which the narrow circlet of gold was shining. "You told me to—to leave the ring with you," she said, after a while; "but I—I think I should like to keep it."

He drew a hard breath. "You asked me, Mary, if you would be forced to wear the ring,

and I told you I would keep it—if you wished me to. It is yours to do with as you will."

"Then I shall keep it," she said, meditatively. "I can't see why I should care for it; but I do."

"You haven't told me yet whether you will be my guest to-day," he said, at length, disturbing her reverie, which seemed centred curiously on the circle of gold upon her hand.

"I have never worn a ring," she murmured. "I never cared for them. But this is different—somehow."

His grave smile recalled her to herself. "I will go with you," she said, hurriedly. "And —and I need not say anything to any of them?"

"I shall be glad if you will leave all explanations to me," he told her, patiently.

"Then I will do it," she said, with a sigh of relief. "It would be very hard, I am sure."

"And very unnecessary," he assured her. "Come, let us go. They will be waiting for us."

VIII

HE talked to her easily as they walked along—of his home chiefly, and of how the Ghent family had lived there for more than a hundred years, since the day of one Hugh Ghent, of early colony fame, who had brought his young English wife from sunny Devonshire into the shadows of the savage primæval forest, and of how they two had loved and suffered, as slowly and painfully they had wrought a home for their brood of little ones.

The old stone house, he told her, was built early in the last century by yet another Hugh Ghent, and from him had descended from father to son, with many articles of ancient furniture brought from over sea in the holds of English vessels. Twice it had suffered from fire, but both times it had been saved

by its owner, and each passing generation had left some token of its occupancy about the place. Thus the rose-garden was the legacy of one Alice Ghent, the wife of the second Hugh. She had pined for the roses of her father's garden, and her husband had made for her a rich plot and planted it with roots and slips, which he obtained with infinite patience and the expenditure of many a hard-earned shilling.

"And are the roses still there?" Mary asked him.

"Yes," he told her, with quiet pride. "We have taken care to grow fresh cuttings from time to time from the old stock, so that the garden remains very like what it must have been when my great-grandmother made pot-pourri out of the full-blown roses. There is one white climbing-rose, which the lovely Alice planted with her own hands at the door-step, and that is still living and blooming."

His eyes were upon her listening face as he added: "It has been the custom for each

bridegroom to gather a rose from that bush for his wife as she crosses the threshold of the old house for the first time. Will you accept one from me, Mary?"

Mary shook her head. "She would not like me to have one," she said.

"Who would not like you to have one, Mary?"

"That lovely Alice. If she knew about me, she would say that I had no right to a rose from her bush."

His grave face brightened into a half smile. "But the bush is mine now, you know, and you— I asked you if you would accept the rose from me. Will you, Mary?"

She turned her face away from him so that he could see only her little ear glowing amid the loose curves of her hair. "She would not like me to have it," she murmured, obstinately.

They were in full sight of the old Ghent homestead now, and so Mary saw it for the first time. Withdrawn a dignified space from

the road, its ample gray front set with rows upon rows of shining small-paned windows, their green shutters thrown wide to the sun and air. Over the long sweep of the dormered roof tall elms drooped their swaying boughs, and the gravelled walk leading to the narrow front door was gay with old-fashioned flowers, peonies, phlox and larkspur, columbine, pansies, pinks, and rose-geraniums.

He was silent as they passed slowly between the borders, her white gown brushing gusts of fragrance from the crowding blossoms. They had reached the portico now, and the sound of voices reached them from the door set hospitably wide to the summer air.

"Just a moment, Mary," he said, quietly. "I wish my mother was here to welcome you to-day, but I am the last of my line, so you must even cross the threshold of the old Ghent homestead unwelcomed by kith or kin. But I want you to understand this one thing: this is your home from henceforth, Mary. You may not care to revisit it after to-day; but if

the time ever comes when you long for the shelter and peace of home, don't forget that you have one."

Deliberately he reached for and plucked a single, half-opened rose from the great, gnarled bush which shaded the old-fashioned doorway, his grave face paling a little as he silently offered it to the girl.

"Do you—would you like me to have it?" she stammered.

His eyes answered her.

She stretched out her hand for the flower, and he took it for an instant in his own, then stooped and touched it lightly with his lips. "Welcome home, Mary," he said, and lifted his bride lightly across the threshold, as had every Ghent bridegroom of the vanished generations.

Permelia McIlheny was waiting at the foot of the stairway. "I do welcome you home, Mrs. Ghent," she said, formally. "Will you be pleased to come up-stairs to the madam's room?"

Mary followed the woman's gentle patter as if in a dream, up the quaint winding of the shallow-stepped stair, guarded by twisted spindles of mahogany, to the upper floor, with its wide hallway, hung with shadowy portraits, and set here and there with curious carved settles and massive, brass-bound chests.

"This is the madam's chamber," said Permelia, with becoming pride, as she softly opened a door. "All the ladies Ghent have slept here in their day, ma'am; their children have been born here, and here they have died. It is a very pleasant, sightly room, looking out to sea on the east and on the gardens to the south, and I hope you will like it. Master Hugh has had me keep it always just as his mother left it; but you will change it if you like, of course."

Mary glanced about the spacious chamber, cool in its snowy draperies of embroidered dimity, with a strange flutter in her throat. "All the ladies Ghent" seemed watching her with quiet reproach in their soft eyes, as she

gazed at her reflection in the tall, gilt mirror which hung over the mahogany dresser. Her fingers trembled as she touched her hair into becoming order. The roses at her breast were drooping with the heat. She removed them, and after a moment's hesitation fastened in their place the fresh, half-opened bud.

"It is only for to-day," she thought.

"The needle-work in the room was all done by the late madam," Permelia McIlheny was saying, in her soft contralto. "Would you be pleased to look at the wreaths on the pillow-cases, ma'am, and the border and monogram on the linen sheets?"

Mary's gray eyes turned obediently to the great, white-canopied bed with its spotless furnishings. "I cannot sew at all," she murmured.

"Eh! Well, never mind," Permelia told her, indulgently; "there is enough and to spare of plenishings, plain and broidered, about the house. But I shall show you it all later, ma'am. I have kept everything sacred, as

you will see. But, oh, be good to Master Hugh, ma'am! He's the last of the family, and he's been sad and lonely since his mother went. His father died when he was a little lad, as of course you know. We've been hoping, father and I, that he'd marry these years past; but I don't know why, he never seemed to care for anything but his books in-doors, and the sea and the sky and the land outside. When he told us yesterday that he was to be married to-day, it was like a clap of thunder to father and me. But we're none the less glad, ma'am, because it's been so sudden—to us."

She waited, respectfully but determinedly, for Mary's answer. "It was sudden—for me, too," began Mary; then stopped short. "Mr. Ghent will explain everything," she stammered. "I—"

"May I come in?" demanded a soft voice. "I had begun to think you were never coming down."

"Felice!" sighed Mary, with wordless relief.

Miss McIlheny withdrew to the door, where she paused to say, with smiling dignity, "You will be feeling hungry, Miss Vivian, I am sure; refreshments will be served whenever the madam is ready to come down."

"Oh, Mary, honey, I feel as though I had stepped into a fairy story; and I should think you would, too! Isn't this the *sweetest* old house! But wait till you've seen the carved Sheraton and spindle-legged Chippendale down-stairs, and the stunning old blue china, and the curious bronze jars filled with rose leaves and spices. I never dreamed it was like this, though I've heard father and mother talk about the place for years. Mother once tried to buy a mahogany table from Mr. Ghent's mother. She said, when she came back, that she felt about as she would if she had offered to buy the crown of England from Queen Victoria."

"This was her room," said Mary, unaware of the sigh which accompanied her words. "I am glad I have seen it. I shall like to

remember it—afterward. Come, we must go down."

"But, Mary, dear, you can't mean to leave him—now, do you?"

Mary paused with her hand on the door. "Everything will be just as we have arranged it, Felice," she said, coldly. "He has said so. Nothing has happened which will change our plans in the least. But I have promised to leave explanations to him."

Miss Vivian shrugged her slim shoulders in wordless amazement. And still her wonder grew and waxed into positive exasperation, as she watched the two during the hours that followed.

The refreshments of which Miss McIlheny had spoken proved to be a dainty luncheon, served on priceless old egg-shell china, pink and white and delicately gilt like apple blossoms. And here Miss McIlheny made a pretty ceremonial of seating Mary at the head of the table. Then old Andrew McIlheny, at a signal from the host, stood up in his place and thanked the Lord in a loud voice for the

marvellous mercies which had followed the Ghent family through past generations. He prayed yet more fervently for the new family which had that day been founded upon the old hearth-stone, entreating the gracious favor of the Most High upon the young wife whose hands held the fair promise of the future, and upon her husband, the present head of the house, and upon their children and their children's children, unto the third and fourth generations. The old man's sonorous "Amen" was echoed by the mild little clergyman and his mild little wife.

At the conclusion of this quaint epithalamium, Felice Vivian stole a swift glance at the host from under her lashes. He sat in his place, serious and thoughtful, his eyes dwelling on Mary's composed face.

"How *can* she be such an iceberg!" murmured Miss Vivian, wrathfully.

"Excuse me; were you speaking to me?" chirped the little minister's wife, who sat at her left.

"Um— No— That is, I was just admiring this exquisite old china, Mrs. Elder," said Felice, recovering herself with nervous haste.

"It is elegant," agreed the reverend lady, bending her spectacled gaze upon her plate; "but I haven't been able so far to take my eyes off the bride. She is so beautifully calm and self-possessed. Is she a particular friend of yours, Miss Vivian?"

"I have known her for several years."

"And where, pray, did she first meet her husband?" blandly inquired Mrs. Elder. "I always like to know the history of every wedding Mr. Elder and I attend—professionally, you know; and, of course, we attend a great many. Mr. Elder is *very* popular among the young people. They frequently come from other parishes to the parsonage to be married. I have an orange-tree which blossoms in the winter, which I bought with one of my wedding-fees. Perhaps you didn't know that the clergyman's wife is always entitled to the fees? Yes, indeed; I quite count on my little income

from that source! Last year I bought all the children's stockings with them."

Felice murmured polite interest in these artless revelations.

"I am *so* romantic," continued Mrs. Elder, confidentially. "Why, do you know, I have made it a point for years to keep a wedding-souvenir book, with the names and dates, and a piece of the bride's gown, a flower from her bouquet, and any little facts relating to their courtship which I can gather. I find I can always entertain a wedding-party — in that awkward pause just after the ceremony, you know—or a ladies' sewing-society, or a regular church-social with my book. People are invariably interested in anything pertaining to courtship and marriage. What is that sweet quotation about all the world being fond of engaged people? I never *could* remember poetical quotations—though Mr. Elder does, in the most wonderful way. He finds it exceedingly useful in his pulpit-work."

"Perhaps you mean 'All the world loves a

lover,'" quoted Felice, hastily anticipating the dawn of a fresh inquiry in the lady's wandering gaze.

"Oh yes, that is it, and a beautiful saying it is, too, and *so* true! I am just as fond of love stories and romances as a young girl, though you might not think it—and, for that matter, there are love-stories in the Bible, as of course you know, my dear. Now take Solomon's Song, for example; it always seemed to me that it wasn't meant to be *entirely* figurative. What do you think, Miss Vivian?"

Felice confessed that she had not deeply considered the matter of late. Whereupon Mrs. Elder urgently advised her to do so.

"It is really an exquisite love poem, I have always thought, and Mr. Elder tells me that the more advanced critics are coming around to my point of view."

The little lady drew up her plump figure with gentle pride as she helped herself to jellied chicken. "Delicious, isn't it?" she twittered, comfortably. "Now, if you don't

mind—as the only bridesmaid, you know—just telling me a little more about this sweet, simple wedding for my book. *A Wreath of Orange Buds*, I call it. Don't you think it a pretty idea for a clergyman's wife?"

"Indeed, yes," agreed Felice, dimpling with impish mischief. "But why not ask the bride? It would be so much more romantic to get the facts from her."

"*So* it would, my dear, and thank you for suggesting it. See, she is about to cut that great, white cake which Miss McIlheny has just brought in! A regular bride's-cake, isn't it? I will wait till she has finished, and then—"

"Perhaps you had better wait till after luncheon," suggested Felice, with tardy contrition.

But the minister's little wife was not to be deterred from her romantic quest.

"Dear Mrs. Ghent," she began, smilingly, "*would* you mind giving me a few particulars relating to your courtship? Nothing sacred,

my dear—of course I understand all about that —but merely the date of your engagement, and where it took place, and a few items of that sort—for my memory-book, you know. I have brought it with me to show you all, and after luncheon, when Mr. Elder has finished filling out the marriage certificate, and everything is signed, sealed, and delivered, it will be *my* turn! I shall want the autographs of those present, and later, my dear, if you *would* give me a scrap of that sweet white dress and a flower from your bouquet. I remember, now, you didn't carry a regular made bouquet at the ceremony; but that lovely, half-opened bud you are wearing will do quite as well. I may beg that one, mayn't I?"

Mary's startled eyes sought her husband's face, her hands instinctively closing over the rose upon her breast. "Not this," she stammered, "I—"

"My wife," said Hugh Ghent, quietly, "wishes to keep the rose she is wearing for

her own memory-book; but she will be most happy to give you a flower."

He arose deliberately, and lifting the great bowl of blossoms from its place in the centre of the table, held it low for Mary's choosing.

"Oh!" breathed Felice, understandingly, and leaned forward in her chair to look, with the rest, at the pretty picture of the man, the maid, and the roses.

He walked with them, in the sober light of the late afternoon, as far as the hedge which separated his own meadows from Dr. Vivian's sloping lawn. "I will leave you here," he said.

Felice Vivian stopped short. "Very well, then, I will bid you good-bye," she said, crisply. "I've had a beautiful day!"

He bowed low over her little hand. She almost snatched it from him in her haste to be gone.

"Good-bye!" she repeated, with a gurgle of low laughter, and, darting through a nar-

row opening in the hedge, disappeared like a wood-nymph.

Mary had stopped, too, and was looking in a vaguely troubled way at the sky, covered with myriads of soft, round clouds hurrying in from the sea, like flocks of frightened sheep; at the saddened landscape; at the trees, turning the silver of their leaves to the fitful wind.

"Good-bye," she sighed.

His eyes were upon her face.

"It doesn't seem quite—grateful in me," she added, after a long pause, "and yet—"

"The gratitude is mine, Mary," he interrupted. "I thank you for this day."

She seemed to be considering his answer. After a while she sighed again, and again her troubled eyes wandered away to the quiet landscape beyond.

"I feel," she said, slowly, "as though I had been dreaming, and were trying to awaken. It is very strange."

He saw that her face was quivering, like that of a frightened child.

"You are tired, Mary," he said, cheerfully. "I must not keep you standing here longer. Good-bye!"

She watched him wistfully, as he went away. Then she turned and followed Felice, whose white dress fluttered among the groups of distant shrubbery. She was dimly unhappy, and her throat ached as if from suppressed sobbing.

After a little she stopped and looked back across the meadows, shading her eyes with her hand against the shaft of sunlight that pricked the hurrying gray clouds overhead. He was still in sight, walking swiftly with bent head; now he had reached the open bars; and now he had turned. He saw her standing there on the green hill-side, and lifted his hat in mute token of farewell.

Tears rushed to Mary's eyes and fell down her cheeks like warm rain.

"Why am I crying?" she asked herself, wonderingly. But though she could not understand her tears, they kept on flowing. They

were pleasant tears, quite unlike any she had ever shed before. And so weeping softly, but without pretence of sorrow, she came to Dr. Vivian's house, and in due course to her own room, where she wept her wondering fill in the comforting silence.

IX

HEN Felice Vivian knocked at Mary's door an hour or so later it was with a timidity entirely new and surprising to herself. Already she had become mysteriously aware of the impassable barrier which marriage rears between the wife and the maid.

Mary was sitting by the window, her face composed and tranquil, as was its wont, but bearing unmistakable traces of recent tears.

"Why, Mary, honey!" cooed Felice, in an instant flutter of feminine sympathy, "you've been crying." Her dark eyes sparkled with exciting speculation as to the reason for these belated tears.

"Yes," admitted Mary, without attempt at subterfuge, "I have been crying, though I'm sure I don't know why."

"I know why," triumphed Felice, dimpling with romantic enjoyment.

Mary's limpid gaze was both inquiring and trustful.

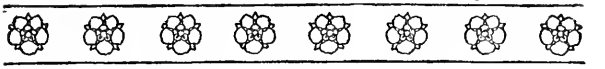
"You couldn't bear to have him leave you, poor dear! And why did you allow it?"

Mary appeared plunged into profound depths of conscientious retrospection. "No, Felice," she said, at last, "you are mistaken. I expected that he would go away. He said that he would, you know. But I'm afraid he will find it very unpleasant to explain everything to Miss McIlheny and her father. I'm sure I should."

"*Unpleasant!*" cried Miss Vivian, wrathfully. "Why, Mary, he loves you!"

Mary shook her lovely head. "How could that be?" she asked, mildly. "We are—why, we are strangers to each other. But he has been very good to me. I shall always remember that, and I shall remember to-day, too." She sighed, reminiscently.

"If he hadn't fallen in love with you, Mary,



he wouldn't have wished to marry you," Felice spoke slowly and convincingly. "He *does* love you, and I think he is perfectly irresistible. Really, honey, I could have shaken you for acting so like a graven image to-day!"

Mary surveyed her friend calmly, and with just a tinge of the displeasure she had displayed earlier in the day. "Perhaps you don't realize it, Felice, but that is a very strange thing for you to say to me," she said, with dignity. "If he loved me, it would have been perfectly easy for him to tell me so. He would not have left it for some one else to say."

"If he had told you, what would you have done?" persisted Felice, recklessly.

Again Mary pondered this new and unsupported hypothesis. Then she blushed resentfully. "I can't imagine his saying anything of the sort to me," she murmured. "He—Why, Felice, he isn't at all like any other man I ever met."

Felice apparently smothered a yawn in her

handkerchief. "Shall you come down to dinner to-night, Mrs. Ghent, or would you like me to send you up something?" she inquired, cheerfully.

Mary started at the sound of his name. "Why do you call me—that?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Because it is your name, dear," said Miss Vivian, in a business-like tone. "You may as well get used to it. And, by-the-way, shall I tell father and mother, or will you?"

Mary drew a deep breath. "Must they know right away?"

"Of course, child; everybody's got to know. That funny little clergyman will publish it in the papers to-morrow, and his wife will tell every one she knows all about that sweetly unique country wedding. I could see she was really in a hurry to get away at the last; and there is her memory-book, you know."

Mary's white fingers crept up to touch the drooping rose at her breast; she sighed pathetically. "It is very unpleasant to have

one's affairs published, and—and discussed," she complained. "I should like to have kept it all quite to myself to—to think about."

"Well, honey, you may think about it all you like," observed Miss Vivian, coolly, "and other people will talk about it all they like. But I *am* sorry for him."

"He didn't appear sorry—do you think he did, Felice?" implored Mary. "I'm afraid I have been selfish and—and inconsiderate; but"—dejectedly—"there's no helping it now. I can never make it up to him."

"Yes you could."

"How?"

Miss Vivian burst into a mocking little laugh. "While you're thinking over the matter in general, honey, suppose you concentrate upon this one thing in particular. It's one of those deeply involved psychological problems; but an educated person like yourself ought to be able to elucidate it in time."

Mary was brushing her tumbled hair, which had fallen in a shining veil about her face,

quite concealing it from Felice. "I am going to my guardian to-morrow," she announced, suddenly. "I shall start by an early train."

Felice paused in the friendly act of laying out a dinner-gown. "Well?" she said, guardedly.

"I must tell him what I have done," went on Mary, in a strangely muffled voice. "And I shall ask him to give me my money. Then we must start for Hawaii at once—*at once*, Felice! Perhaps a resident architect will be able to do the work satisfactorily. Anyway, we must begin it as soon as possible."

"Oh, Mary, I surely thought you would give that all up now."

"Can't you see, Felice, that I *must* go on with it now? It was only for that he— *He expects me to do it!*"

"Oh!" murmured Miss Vivian, stupidly.

"I should die with shame not to go away and begin that college directly, Felice. I must go. Don't you understand?"

"I see what you mean, honey, but—"

Mary's white fingers trembled visibly as they knotted up the shimmering coils about her head. "We won't talk about it any more after to-night, if you please, Felice," she said, with a heroic effort after her vanished self-possession. "And—and will you please tell your father and mother that I am married—to-morrow—after I am gone?"

"Oh, Mary! don't you mean to leave any word for him?"

"There isn't anything to say, Felice."

Not until after Mary's hurried departure for Boston the next morning did Miss Vivian realize the fact that she had not been invited to accompany her friend. It was during the course of a rather unpleasant explanatory interview with her parents that the significant omission occurred to her mind.

"I never heard of such a preposterous affair!" sputtered Dr. Vivian, wrathfully. "And to think that it should have taken place from my house, with the consent—I had al-

most said the collusion — of my daughter! Felice, I am astonished and displeased. You should have come to me at once with the whole story. I must see Ghent this very morning, and the matter must be thoroughly ventilated and placed upon its proper footing."

"What is its proper footing, please, daddy?" inquired Felice, with proper humility.

"I am surprised that you should ask, girl! Mary, as a married woman, has no business to be galivanting about the country without the knowledge and consent of her husband. It's an outrage to the proprieties!"

"The wedding was Mr. Ghent's own idea, daddy, and I don't see, exactly, how we are going to help it."

"Well, I shall see him at once, and let him understand that *I* am not a party to—to this—er—nefarious abandonment scheme. That's what it is, legally—an abandonment scheme, to secure her fortune. And you allowed it to go on unhindered. Can you explain yourself, daughter?"

Miss Vivian's scarlet lips quivered. "I—I think you are very cruel to me, daddy," she faltered, with a becoming sparkle of tears on her curling lashes. "*I* didn't invent it. I should never have thought of such a thing; and Mary didn't tell me till yesterday morning. Then she was *so* determined. And after all, daddy, she's of age, and nobody could stop her getting married, not even you!"

This unconscious tribute to his quasi-omnipotence was not without its soothing effect upon Dr. Vivian. Nevertheless he buttoned himself tightly into his coat, though it was a warm morning; and armored further against sickly sentimentality with a stout walking-stick, and a Panama hat of fiercely curling brim, he presently sallied forth in search of the forsaken bridegroom.

He found Hugh Ghent in the act of carefully examining some freshly set strawberries in the privacy of his own garden.

"Good-morning, sir!" quoth the doctor, with frowning severity of mien.

"Good-morning, Dr. Vivian," replied the farmer, with a cheerfully disconcerting smile. "These strawberry-plants seem likely to do well."

"Humph—yes!" admitted the doctor, querulously. "Your soil is tip-top for fruit. Wish mine was as good. But that's not what I've come to talk to you about to-day. I've been having a little conversation with my daughter this morning regarding that — er — wedding which took place yesterday. I don't know what you think of *me*, sir, for permitting anything of the kind. But the fact is, I knew nothing of it; not a word, sir! till after Miss —er—till after the young woman in the case went to Boston. I suppose you're aware that she's gone?"

Hugh Ghent brushed the dry loam from his fingers with an immaculate handkerchief. "Will you do me the favor of stepping into my library, Dr. Vivian?" he asked, politely. "It will perhaps be well for me to explain myself somewhat, though I had not ex-

pected to consult you with regard to my relations to my wife."

"So you are disposed to regard the young woman as your wife, I see!" fumed the doctor. "Well, sir, I'd about as soon take the west wind to wife as to marry that girl. She's no more idea of the proprieties of married life than a two-year-old baby! Felice knew better, and she should have come to me with the whole piece of outrageous folly at once. I should have put a stop to it!"

Hugh Ghent placed a chair for his perturbed guest, and, further, proceeded to pour for him a glass of cool water from the silver pitcher on the table. He appeared to be quite at his ease, and even smiled as he deliberately seated himself opposite the doctor.

"This piece of outrageous folly, as you are pleased to term my marriage with Miss Adams, was my own idea," he began, quietly. "Did not Miss Vivian tell you so?"

"I believe she said something of the sort—yes," growled the doctor. "But it was easy

to see that you had been led into it by a misunderstanding of the facts."

"I understood the facts, I think, perfectly."

"You did! May I ask if you expected Miss —er—the young woman—to leave you at once in this high-handed manner?"

"I certainly did expect it. My wife is free to do precisely as she pleases. She intends, I believe, to found a college for women in Hawaii."

The doctor's jaw dropped. "What in the world—" he began. "Why, man, what did you marry her for?"

"You know the facts regarding her aunt's will, I suppose?"

"Yes, I know all that. Tommy-rot of the worst sort, I call it. A crazy old maid's notion, and it's set a young maid crazy, too, I should say. The will should have been set aside."

"As a matter of fact, it was not set aside. It will not need to be now."

"But what— You don't mean to tell me—"

Hugh Ghent eyed his interlocutor with imperturbable good-humor. Indeed, a quiet and (to the other) inscrutable smile was playing about his lips.

"I married my wife that she might have a chance to do as she liked," he said, conclusively.

The doctor brought down his walking-stick with a wrathful thud. "That's no way to manage a woman, sir!" he snorted. "And when you've had as much experience with 'em as I have, you'll find it out. Short and sharp, is the word! Do this, madam. Do the other. Or, leave the third thing undone. They like it, too! And just to prove that I know what I'm talking about, I'll give you a leaf out of my own experience. Why, I remember when I was courting Mrs. Vivian; she was an airy, teasing little butterfly of a thing, no higher than my third waistcoat button—very like our Felice. And she led me an uneasy dance for many a long day. I was young and green,

and didn't know any better, so I sighed and prayed and pined and dwindled—lost my appetite—I did, sir, upon my word! lost twenty pounds in weight, and all for nothing. My little lady was like the weather, kind one day, thundering and lightning the next.

"Well, sir, I got mighty tired of it, after a while. And so one morning I rode over to see Dolly. I found her in one of her pettish, teasing humors, peeping at me from under her lashes, and laughing at me in a way that was fairly maddening. I stood it for a matter of half an hour or so; then I jumps to my feet. 'Good-bye, Dolly,' I said, loud and careless like, though I was ready to cry like a booby. 'I'm off for the North Pole with Androvsky!' You remember that Russian chap that got up an arctic expedition about that time? Frozen, every man Jack of 'em, and served 'em right, too!

"'*No!*' says Miss Dolly, and all her pretty pink color disappeared, and with it every one of her tantalizing airs and graces. '*No*, Robert!' she says, half sobbing.

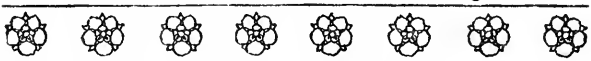
"'Yes, Dolly,' I repeated, louder than before, 'I'm off to-morrow! I'm sick of this philandering, madam!' I said.

"Well, to cut a long story short, she flung herself into my arms and entreated me to stay. Of course I stayed, and we were married in a month's time. That's *my* way of managing a woman, sir; and I've never had any trouble with any of 'em from that day to this."

Hugh Ghent had listened with respectful attention to this illuminating dissertation. "All women are not alike," he observed, seriously.

"They're alike in one thing, young man; they all respect and love a masterful husband, and don't you forget it. I'd advise you to put your foot down on this nonsense of Mary's, right now, and to keep it down. I sha'n't allow Felice to go on this wild-goose chase to Hawaii. And I've told her so. She's next door to being engaged to be married herself, and to a young man I thoroughly approve of."

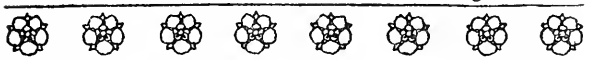
The honest doctor stood up and squared



his shoulders. "I hope, Ghent, you understand that I very much regret the—er—circumstance of yesterday," he went on, pulling nervously at his white beard. "And if I can be of any service to you in—er— Well, of course, under the laws of the state, you understand, you have not done so badly for yourself. Whether you ever live with your wife or not, you are entitled to a certain share of her property, and I should advise you to take steps at once to secure your rights."

Hugh Ghent raised his hand in a dignified gesture of dissent. "I must set you right on that point, Dr. Vivian," he said, quietly. "I not only do not propose to interfere with Mary in the carrying out of her plans and purposes, but I recognize the fact, and I wish every one else to recognize it, that she is my wife in name only. I have already written to her guardian notifying him of the marriage, and waiving every possible claim upon her person and her property. Do you quite understand me?"

"I understand you— Lord, yes! But if



that is the case, why in the name of Heaven did you marry her?"

"That," said the other, quietly, "is, at present, entirely my own affair."

X

JUDGE CHANTRY sat in his own library in his accustomed chair of carved mahogany, placed at its wonted angle in relation to his massive desk. This imposing concatenation of furniture and legal authority no longer suggested an inaccessible Olympian peak to the eyes of the girl who sat opposite; nevertheless, she waited with her accustomed docility for her guardian to speak.

He did so at length, tapping softly at measured intervals upon the page of a letter which lay spread out before him, the habitual gesture conveying to the beholder's mind in some subtle way the conscious mastery of the man over the matter in hand.

"What you have told me, Mary, with regard to your marriage, is, perhaps, the more

surprising when taken in connection with this — er — document," Judge Chantry said, thoughtfully.

Mary's gray eyes were fastened expectantly upon his face. She did not speak.

"I have here a communication, received by the morning post, from a person who signs himself Hugh Ghent. That is the name of your husband, I believe you told me."

"Yes," she murmured, breathlessly, as her guardian applied himself deliberately to a perusal of the clearly written page.

"Signing himself, as I have said, Hugh Ghent," went on the judge. "Hum—ah—very singular indeed!"

"What is it that is singular about his letter?" she asked.

Something new and unlooked for in her voice caused her guardian to look up at her sharply from over his glasses.

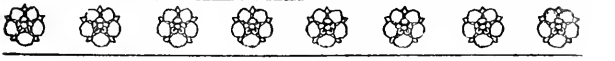
"Had this letter contained certain demands —even threats—I should not have been surprised," he said, slowly. "In permitting

yourself to be drawn into this—er—hasty and ill-advised marriage with a perfect stranger, you may not be aware of it, Mary, but in reality you have laid yourself open to very serious annoyance, and, yes—loss, of various descriptions. Loss of prestige, in short; of reputation; and, most certainly, of money. It was a very grave risk you incurred, Mary—very grave. I tremble to think what might have been the result had this man, Ghent, been disposed to push his legal claims."

"He is not like that!" she cried. "You do not know him!"

"Nor do you, it would seem," retorted the judge, dryly. "However—"

He removed his eye-glasses, using them to accentuate his dominant tapping upon the letter, which he again spread upon his desk. "And, as a matter of fact, this person—whom we must, for the present, call your husband—takes a very unlooked for position with regard to his relation to yourself. In a word,



he expressly waives any and all claims upon your fortune and person."

Mary drew a deep breath, and her eyes fell to her lap, in which her hands lay loosely folded.

"He states," continued her guardian, "that it is his earnest wish that you may be entirely unhindered in the carrying out of your plans and purposes, and ends by requesting me to second his wishes in every possible way. May I ask what plans and purposes you have in mind, madam?"

"I intend to use all of my money to build a college for women in Hawaii," said Mary, in a small, uncertain voice, curiously unlike her own. "I wish to do this immediately—to-morrow, if possible."

Judge Chantry permitted one corner of his mouth to slowly relax. It was his nearest approach to a smile.

"I should like it if you can arrange everything so that I can go away at once," she went on, in a firmer tone. "He—he expects me to do it."

"Ah?"

His sharp note of inquiry recalled her eyes to his face.

"Yes," she said, slowly, "I told him—everything—all about the will, and of how I wished above all things to go to Hawaii and devote my life to the higher education of the women there; and he—he said he would marry me so that I could do this. And—and he did."

"Your—husband, Mr. Ghent, expects to join you in Hawaii, of course," said the judge, with careful politeness. "I begin to understand, I think."

Mary shook her head. "No," she said, in a low voice, "he will remain here. It is I who must go away."

"Alone?"

"I—I hope—I expect Felice Vivian will go with me; we have been making plans for a long time for the college."

"Then I am to infer that this marriage of—of—convenience—was arranged between you

and Miss Vivian, with the consent of the man?" inquired her guardian, ironically.

Again Mary shook her head. "Felice knew nothing of it till—till the day of the wedding."

"Where did the marriage ceremony take place?"

"In Mr. Ghent's cornfield," replied Mary, dejectedly; she was apparently quite indifferent to the incredulous gaze which the judge had fixed upon her face.

"And why in the cornfield, if I may venture to inquire?"

"We—that is I—had never seen him except in the cornfield. And afterward we had luncheon at his house. I—enjoyed that very much."

"Who comprised the party?"

"The clergyman, his wife, Felice Vivian, and an old man, Andrew McIlheny, and his daughter. They live with him. They are his best friends."

"Humph! Very interesting indeed. You have the certificate of marriage, I suppose?"

Mary laid a folded paper on the desk. "He said you would like to see it," she murmured.

Judge Chantry busied himself with the document for a few minutes. "This appears to be correct," he said, at length. "But of course I shall have to verify it."

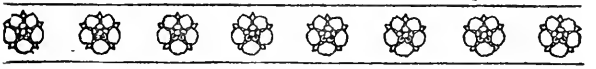
Mary gazed at him inquiringly.

"I must look up the record of the officiating clergyman, and also see if the other papers in the case were properly made out and filed. It will take some days. By-the-way; this marriage took place yesterday, I see. At what time did you—er—where did you take leave of your husband?"

Mary's limpid gaze clouded. "He walked with Felice and me as far as the hedge," she said, slowly. "Then he went away. I shall never see him again."

"Why do you say that?" the judge asked, with a gleam of something very like humanizing curiosity in his eyes.

"He said that he would remain there—at home, and I—must go to Hawaii. How soon



can you give me my money, sir? I should like it to be right away, if you please."

Judge Chantry leaned back in his chair and surveyed his ward with the air of a man who has recently acquired a limited stock of fine-grained patience. "Your property," he began, "is not—er—exactly in the case with that of the small boy who keeps his pennies in a cast-iron bank. It is, in short, invested."

"Yes," acquiesced Mary; "but you can get it for me, can't you?"

"Precisely; I am coming to that in due course. It is invested, I was about to inform you, madam, in a variety of ways—in stocks, in bonds, in corporations, in real estate. All good, all solid and unimpeachable. I have looked out for that. But any considerable property, so invested and yielding interest, if suddenly turned into cash at a forced sale, is bound to depreciate. Do you follow me?"

"Yes; but I don't mind that," sighed Mary —"the depreciating, I mean; if I can only have it right away."

"There is also one other thing to be considered," proceeded her guardian, imperturbably, "which may or may not have occurred to your mind. Your property, while it is a fairly large one, would be a mere drop in a very dry bucket if invested in a college for women in Hawaii. Also, such an undertaking is too vast for a person of your age and experience. I have the honor to be trustee of a woman's college in America, and I am frequently reminded that as a gilt-edged investment a college is hardly—"

"That will make no difference," interrupted Mary. She was twisting her wedding-ring upon her white finger. "Do you think," she asked, earnestly, "that I could go—to-morrow?"

Her guardian deliberately resumed the measured tapping of his eye-glasses, which he appeared to concentrate upon the clear signature of Hugh Ghent. "It will be well, I think" —tap, tap, tap—"for you to school yourself to certain unavoidable delays in this matter"—

tap, tap, tap. "Legal procedures are necessarily somewhat tedious in their nature, and I foresee"—tap, tap, tap—"many hinderances of one sort and another, which—er—will probably prevent your departure for Hawaii for at least a year."

Mary leaned forward in her chair. Her eyes shone with a sudden lovely radiance of joy which startled her guardian. "Could you—lend me the money, sir?" she asked. "He—expects me to go at once, you know."

"No, madam; I regret to say that it would be impossible for me to negotiate a loan of that magnitude just at present. But I can scarcely see how your action, whether deferred or immediate, will affect your husband. He leaves you entirely free; and, you tell me, you never expect to see him again. May I—er—ask if the man Ghent is personally disagreeable to you? Is he, for example, a rude, boorish sort of person?"

Mary's eyes opened wide. "Oh no," she breathed; "he is—"

"Well, madam, am I to infer that you are unable to tell me what sort of person your husband is?"

Mary had risen and was looking appealingly down at her guardian. "I don't think I can tell you," she said, at last. "He is—not like—any man I ever saw before."

"An ugly, ill-favored fellow—eh? Stoop-shouldered, sullen, stupid — a typical farm-hand, in short. Yes, yes, I understand, perfectly; but I wonder at you, Mary, for consenting to bear his name for twenty-four hours."

"He is very — handsome — I think," said Mary, slowly, her fine, dark brows drawn into a thoughtful pucker, as if she were looking intently at a pictured face. "He is tall and broad-shouldered, and very strong—I know, because he can lift me with ease, and I am heavy. He has blue eyes—very beautiful and gentle—yet they seem to look one through and through. His hair is dark-brown, and waves a little. His hands are muscular. He is

kind and generous—and he—" She stopped short.

"Very good!" exclaimed her guardian, briskly. "It seems rather a pity — on the whole—that you should have made up your mind to a legal separation."

Mary gazed at him helplessly. "What—do you mean?" she asked.

"That is precisely what it amounts to," replied her guardian, dryly. "I have here Mr. Ghent's signed declaration to the effect that you are absolutely free. And you have, as definitely, declared your intention to live apart from your husband as long as you live. An unlimited divorce, it seems to me, which would leave you both unhampered, would be more equitable. Indeed, it would be perfectly easy, in existing circumstances, for either party to obtain a complete annulment of the marriage. You have, however, legally secured the control of your property by means of this singular marriage, and I congratulate you, madam, upon the fact."

Mary's wide eyes were upon his face. She seemed frozen into a lovely statue of dismay.

"I do not, however, recommend any hasty action with regard to the divorce, or annulment of the marriage, of which I have spoken," resumed the judge, with a perspicacious frown. "It might lead to certain undesirable complications in the transfer of the property. It will be altogether best, I think, for the present, for you to consider yourself—what you are in fact—Mrs. Hugh Ghent."

"Shall you—say—all this to—*him?*" faltered Mary.

Her guardian's stern mouth relaxed at both corners. His shrewd eyes actually twinkled. "Well, not at present, Mary," he said, gravely. "It would be, I think, rather premature—from a legal stand-point, you understand. I should not like to—er—precipitate matters."

XI

JEROME CHANTRY made his appearance at his uncle's office that same afternoon, cool, bland, and immaculately groomed, as was his wont. Judge Chantry greeted him with a certain acrid displeasure which did not escape the shrewd eyes of the younger man.

"You're feeling all cut up about this matter of Mary's, I see," he observed, without circumlocution, and seated himself with easy composure.

"What do you know about it, sir?" demanded the elder Chantry, sharply.

"Nothing, except that she is married," replied Jerome. "I chanced to see the notice in the paper this morning. Why didn't you warn me the affair was on?" he added, in an injured tone.

"You're a fool, Jerome," observed the judge, trenchantly, but without personal animosity. "I didn't think it of you."

"I didn't think it of myself," returned the other; "but I guess you're right. I was waiting for her to grow up," he went on, ruefully; "there seemed to be plenty of time."

"Well, sir, while you were so patiently waiting for the young person to grow up, she has not been idle. For one thing, she has decided to found a university for women in Hawaii; for another—and in pursuance of the first scheme—she has married a farmer down on the coast, who agreed in advance of the ceremony to leave her perfectly free to do as she likes. She is now at my house, where—"

"No!" exclaimed Jerome, incredulously.

"Where she is merely waiting for me to convert her securities into cash," proceeded the judge, imperturbably. "Immediately thereafter she proposes to set sail for Hawaii, accompanied only by a young woman of her acquaintance, aged twenty or thereabouts.

The pair of them will then proceed to revolutionize the customs of centuries, as they have obtained in the Sandwich Islands, and incontinently transform a parcel of yellow-skinned, dreaming voluptuaries into strenuous college students, after the pattern of Welles-Mawr. This is, in brief, Mrs. Ghent's programme, as she outlined it to me this morning."

"And where, if I may ask, is the accommodating husband meanwhile?" inquired Jerome, with an appreciative grin.

"On his farm, I am led to believe," returned the judge, dryly. "After the wedding-ceremony the young man accompanied his bride and her maid of honor as far as the hedge, where he politely bade them good-day. Mrs. Ghent is, as I have intimated, stopping at my house for the present."

Jerome stared. "You don't mean it, uncle!" he said, at last. "Why, the fellow must be a fool!"

"I'm not so sure of that," replied the other, meditatively. "I'm inclined at present to set

him down as a remarkably clever sort of person."

"What is he after—her money?"

"By no means. He has expressly waived all claims on the property."

Jerome shrugged his shoulders. He was making a rapid review of the case. "Look here, uncle," he said, at last; "granted that I've put off my courtship over long, is there any real reason why I should regard this empty ceremony between Mary and this fellow, Ghent, as an insuperable bar to my wishes? Why, since you spoke to me of her, I have always regarded her as mine—that is to say, I fully intended to marry her as soon as she was fairly out of the bread-and butter period. You've been aware of it all along, sir."

"The marriage might be annulled, certainly," agreed the judge, composedly. "Perhaps, I should say, it might be, if the unqualified consent of both parties to it can be obtained."

Jerome Chantry eyed his elderly relative suspiciously. "You said the farmer chap

agreed to leave her perfectly free?" he inquired.

"I have his signed statement to that effect."

"And Mary proposes to go to Hawaii on this wild-goose chase with some school-girl?"

"She is anxious to start to-morrow."

"You'll not let her go!"

"I cannot prevent it, as you ought to be well aware without asking. However, the delays incident to a transference of the estate will stand in the way of her immediate departure."

Jerome's greenish eyes were riveted upon the toe of his polished boot. He set his thin lips in a determined line. "Then I shall regard the affair as practically settled," he said, after a thoughtful silence. "The marriage is no marriage at all. I shall pay no attention to it—further than to obtain from Mary her consent to its setting aside."

"That will be all that is necessary as a preliminary to an annulment," acquiesced the judge, blandly. "I will, however, withhold my congratulations for the present."

"You think Mary will refuse, I see," observed Jerome, astutely. "But why should she? I'm no stage villain, sir, to break up a marriage that is a marriage; but I don't give a fig for this preposterous Hawaiian education scheme; and it's clear that you don't."

"I cannot say that I deem Mary's plan entirely practicable," said Judge Chantry, cheerfully. "Both young women are far too inexperienced in the ways of the world to attempt to formulate so important an educational scheme unaided. Moreover, I hardly think the native females of the Sandwich Islands require a college of high grade just at present. The demand for such an institution, in short, does not seem to justify the project."

"Then you think well of my idea, uncle? You approve my plans?" Jerome twisted about in his chair as he put these questions with manifest anxiety.

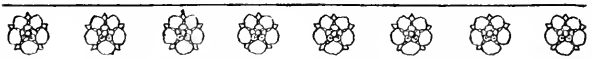
The judge gazed at his nephew speculatively, his shrewd eyes dwelling upon the portly, middle-aged good looks of the other with a

gleam of something like subdued amusement. Jerome's colorless, rather flaccid face flushed uncomfortably under the scrutiny. He fidgeted uneasily in his place and passed one smooth, white hand over the sleek contour of his head, whereon the hair was growing conspicuously thin.

"Well!" he urged, impatiently.

"You ask me if I can approve your plans," said the other, with exceeding gentleness of tone and manner. He was still studying his nephew's face with disconcerting attention. "As a magistrate I could never '*approve*' or 'think well of' an attempt to tamper with the sacredness of the marriage relation. In this particular case—a most peculiar one, I admit—I am inclined to neither approve nor to censure an effort to—er—place matters on their proper and right basis. I should prefer to reserve judgment until later."

Jerome Chantry left his uncle's presence with the light step of a younger man. His somewhat halting admiration for Mary had



just received a tremendous impetus. He was at present inclined to consider himself as very much in love with her; and the unmentioned loss of her fortune, which he had for several years regarded as completely within his grasp, mingled obscurely with his thoughts, coloring them to a degree of life almost startlingly real. It occurred to him, for the first time, that Mary had treated him with positive injustice. He had been patient, kind, not over insistent during the years of her college life, he reminded himself, as he hurried along. But surely she had understood his wishes with regard to herself, and these wishes, heretofore so irresolute as to have contented themselves with occasional calls, boxes of confectionery and limited orders at the florist's, suddenly assumed heroic proportions. Jerome by rapid degrees was led to realize himself a much-abused man, almost heart-broken, in fact. He had been plunged into a most unpleasant predicament, he told himself, with well-simulated indignation, but he would have his rights

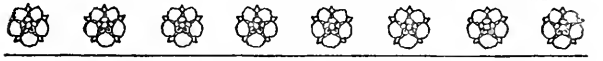
yet; no pale shadow of a marriage should stand in his way. He would rend such cobweb bonds, with force if need be. He was determined — nay, impassioned — and she should know it without loss of time. Arriving at Judge Chantry's house, he believed himself to be very much in earnest; he was likewise uncomfortably and unbecomingly warm.

The afternoon post brought two letters to Mary, both addressed to Mrs. Hugh Ghent. She held them in her hand unopened, dreamily considering the unfamiliar name. It was strong and fine, she slowly decided. He had said she might bear the name that pleased her best. This name pleased her; from henceforth it should be hers—unless— The disquieting words with which her guardian had closed their interview of the morning recurred to her mind. But no, he would never consent to an annulment of the marriage; she was quietly sure of this. Presently it occurred to her to wonder who the writer of the second letter might be. One, she saw, was from

Felice. Felice's letter was delicately blue, and breathed a faint aroma of violets. It contained many pages of thick paper, for it was doubly stamped. The other was square and thin and white, the address written in plain, small characters with very black ink. She was impressed anew with the strength and distinction of the name. "It is like him," she thought. Then she opened the letter with haste. She glanced at the signature at the foot of the one closely written page, and drew a quick breath of wonder.

"My dear Mary,"—it began. "You will be surprised, perhaps, at receiving a letter from me, but I shall not ask you to answer it, and it will take only a few minutes of your to-morrow. I am writing this at midnight on our wedding-day. I meant to have told you what I have to say before you left my house, Mary; but, somehow, my tongue was loath to break the charm of the silence that fell between us at the last.

"You asked me to-day how I could promise what I did. You did not promise, Mary. You



were honest and true, as you must always be—and I did not answer you. But now I want to tell you that in that hour I pledged myself to you, body and soul, as a man would swear allegiance to his queen, asking nothing in return, save that she remain his queen. I want you to know beyond peradventure that you have a subject, Mary, loyal and true; I am sworn to your service in every thought and fibre of my being. You may never need me in your far island home; you may never wish to see me again; but if the day comes when I can serve you, or defend you against any evil or annoyance—and that day may come—I want you to remember this.

"Till then, and always, Mary, I am faithfully yours, HUGH GHENT."

She read the letter slowly, lingering over every word and phrase. Then she sighed. "I should have liked to answer this letter," she said to the surrounding silence, "but he does not ask me to write to him. He expects me to go away."

After a time, during which her eyes rested uninterruptedly upon his letter, she folded it

and replaced it in its envelope with trembling hands. Something intangible seemed to emanate from the insensate paper, which conveyed strange intimations to her blood. She became dimly aware of a peculiar, frightened bounding of her pulses, as though some tremendous, undreamed-of vista of past and future had opened suddenly before her eyes. Unwritten meanings out of the infinite heart of a man pierced her; yesterdays and to-morrows, stretching a shining pathway from the crumbling instant, gleamed before her bewildered gaze. For a moment she struggled, astonished, in unsounded deeps, beyond thought, beyond reason; then, neither thinking nor reasoning, she reached again the familiar shallows of girlhood.

The soft footfall of the well-trained servant who presided over the imposing entrance to Judge Chantry's house, recalled her more completely to herself. He was proffering a card for her inspection. "Mr. Jerome Chantry," she read, and frowned with vague displeasure.

"You may show him in here, Peters," she said, and waited, angrily rosy, for her visitor's appearance.

Mr. Jerome Chantry came in immediately, with the light step and smiling assurance of a man who enters a foreign country well-fortified with guide-book information.

"I'm delighted to see you, Mary," he began, bowing low over her hand. "I had begun to think we were never going to meet again. I have been so unfortunate, you know, in always finding you out when I called."

"Yes," assented the girl, shrinking a little under the fervent and undisguised admiration of his eyes.

He had grown stouter, she reflected, to the point of showing a dimple in one smooth-shaven cheek. Mary was one of those women who regard a dimple in a man's cheek as little less than a crime.

Mr. Chantry continued to gaze at her with smiling audacity. He appeared to divine her antipathy and to enjoy it, as one enjoys the

petulant dislike of a small child, secure in his ultimate triumph.

"I didn't know you were here, Mary," he went on, his voice sinking to a caressing murmur, "till uncle told me just now."

Her eyes questioned him hostilely.

Mr. Chantry's smiling face became suddenly overcast with gloom. "Yes," he said, plaintively, "uncle told me that you were married. Do you know, I call that very cruel of you, Mary; of course you've secured your fortune all right. But why did you marry that farmer fellow? Had you forgotten me, Mary?"

"I should like you to call me by my name," said Mary, icily. "Do you know what it is?"

He sighed. "Don't ask me to call you by another man's name — to-day," he begged. "I can't give up all that I've thought and hoped so suddenly. After I have seen your husband, perhaps I shall begin to realize what has happened."

"You will not see him—at all," said Mary, conclusively.

Mr. Chantry appeared visibly embarrassed. "Uncle was saying something of the sort," he said, in a low voice; "but I— Why, Mary, I couldn't believe it! I refused to believe that you could be led or driven into marrying a man you did not love, and who did not love you. That is why"—tenderly—"I have waited so long and patiently. I was hoping that some day you might realize my—" He paused, apparently overcome by his thronging emotions.

"Stop!" said Mary, breathlessly. "You—you have no right to speak to me in this way!"

"There is no man," went on Mr. Chantry, strongly, "who respects the bond of a true marriage more than I. But this mere ghost of a marriage with a man who cares so little for you that he allows you to go from him without a single effort to hold you, I do *not* respect. Tell me this one thing, Mary—did he ask you to stay with him?"

"No," faltered Mary; "he asked nothing of me—nothing."

"In the letter which he wrote to your guardian on the day of your mariage, he expressly repeated what you have just acknowledged. You are free, Mary, entirely so, and I entreat you to realize your freedom—for my sake!"

The eloquent Mr. Chantry was entirely unprepared for what followed. Mary had arisen and was regarding him with an expression which he fatuously took for one of surprised and even pleased attention. She heard him to the end, then without a word turned and left the room. He heard her hurrying feet upon the stair.

"Well, upon my word, little Mary!" he ejaculated, with an indulgent smile. On the whole, Jerome felt very well pleased with himself as he walked slowly away. He had effectually broken through the barriers of her reserve. He had declared himself unmistakably. The rest, he felt assured, would be easy.

XII

THE patient earth had brought forth fruit of herself after the immemorial fashion; first the blade, then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear. In due course also the reaper had thrust in his sickle at harvest-time, and now the ripened and empty shocks stood in the field, powdered with hoar-frost in the pale light of the tardy dawns. The sea and the sky changing ever, knew little change as the seasons waxed and waned, but the naked trees and the naked earth waited shivering for the snow.

Within doors it was the jovial time of barns filled to bursting with harvests, of cellars redolent with ripened fruit, of laden boards, of roaring fires, of early home-comings and long nights of sleep, while the stars and the frost

sparkled keenly without, and the sea roared hungrily on the black rocks. A merry time, a time of thanksgiving and plentiful good cheer, if one be warm with love and satisfied with its abiding presence on the hearth-stone; yet a grievous time and bitter as the black frost to an uprooted tree if one be alone and lonely.

Hugh Ghent had already learned what it was to be alone. He had grieved sorely when his mother died, yet he had found wholesome solace in the sea and the sky, in his books and his thoughts, and the hard breaths over ploughshare and spade had somehow lightened his load of sorrow. But now that the sea and the sky and the earth had become mysteriously alive with a vanished presence, now that books appeared more dead than the hands that wrote them, and the sweat of the brow yielded only bitterness, he had learned perforce the more difficult lesson of loneliness.

More than three months had passed since his wedding-day, and there had been no word nor sign from Mary. He knew now that he

had expected this and more. The very depth and bitterness of his aching disappointment measured for him the height and sweetness of his hope. He had told her that he would ask nothing; yet with his whole soul he had demanded all from her. Judge Chantry had acknowledged his letter of renunciation, curtly and formally, adding a single paragraph to the effect that Mary would be kept from carrying out her projects for some months, during which time she might be addressed at his house.

One day in early September he met Felice Vivian walking alone in the fields.

"I was hoping to meet you, Mr. Ghent," she said, frankly; "we are leaving to-morrow."

He waited for her to go on, his stubborn tongue refusing any word of conventional regret.

"I—had a letter from Mary to-day; does she—has she written to you?"

"No," he said, harshly.

Miss Vivian flashed a resentful look at his

sombre face. "I think Mary is very unhappy," she said, defiantly.

"Why should she be unhappy?" he asked, still in the cold, harsh tone of one who has put an iron clutch upon his emotions.

The girl shook her head. "Mary isn't like other girls," she said. "She isn't like me—not one bit. I couldn't have done what she did. I should have—"

He was staring at her steadily, a furrow of suffering deepening between his blue eyes. "God knows I meant to help her," he said, at last. "But I did wrong. I see that now."

"Why didn't you make her love you?" demanded Felice, with a sudden keen sparkle of anger. "You could have done it! Why did you let her go away?"

"How could I keep her with me?" he asked, dully. "You know that I could not. It was all a mistake — a stupid blunder of mine," he added, bitterly. "I thought—I hoped—What did I not think and hope, like a fatuous idiot!"

"Mary isn't like any girl I ever knew," repeated Miss Vivian, insistently. "She is more like a child—or a nice, honest boy. But I'm sure she isn't happy. Her letters are—queer."

His haggard eyes fastened hungrily upon her.

"Would you—like to see one of them?" she went on, hurriedly. "I have—in fact, I have two or three of them here. I thought perhaps—"

He took them quietly. "Thank you," he said. "I shall keep them."

The letters proved to be very simple, almost bald accounts of the daily circumstances of her dull life in Judge Chantry's house, when he at length brought himself to the point of reading them. Twice she mentioned Jerome Chantry.

"He persists in coming to see me, Felice," she wrote— "I wish he would stay away." And in another place: "Jerome Chantry sent me violets to-day. I told Peters to throw

them away. They were so sweet they seemed to smother me. Did you ever notice that flowers seem to do that sometimes?

"Oh, my dear, I never guessed what it was like to be lonely before, though I was nearly always alone before I knew you. No, I do not think I can come to you, as you ask. I am trying to study as many hours as possible each day. It keeps me from thinking too much about other things—things that I cannot help. I often think of what our life in Hawaii will be like. It will be a busy life, Felice, and I am glad of that. I mean to fill every minute with work."

It was past midnight when he finally roused himself from the bitter reverie into which he had fallen, her short, pathetic sentences ringing in his ears like muffled cries of pain. "Oh, God!" he groaned; "what can I do to help her?"

The low sobbing of the wind in the chimney and the stealthy patter of sleet against his uncurtained window seemed to answer him. "You can do nothing—nothing!"

He threw himself upon his couch before the dying fire, and through the long hours between midnight and dawn fought again the difficult battle of renunciation, with hard-wrung tears which the darkness mercifully hid. Toward morning he fell asleep. And so Permelia McIlheny found him, when she made her quiet, housewifely rounds of the lower floor in the gray light of dawn. His sleeping face shone white and worn against the dark pillows of the couch, and its almost boyish look of hard-won peace appeared sadder than tears to the faithful eyes of the woman. She stole softly away to the kitchen, sighing and shaking her head in mute passion of tender pity and indignation.

"I'm sore afraid for Master Hugh, father," she said to the old man, who was warming his stiffened fingers over the kitchen stove.

"Afraid for Maister Hugh, eh? Why, daughter, what's happened to Maister Hugh out o' the ordinar'?"

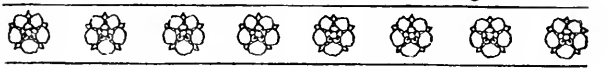
"He never went to his bed all the night,

father, and he's lying asleep now on his sofa. I hadn't the heart to wake him."

"'Tis the matter o' the young woman," said Andrew McIlheny, wisely. "He should have asked me, should Maister Hugh, who knows the ways o' women folks from a long life o' experience. The wooin' should aye come before the weddin'; an' if there be no wooin' there should be no weddin'. Maister Hugh thought to turn the customs o' the warld aside; but that's no easy matter for any man."

"She had no right to marry him unless she was willing to be his true and honest wife," broke in the woman, harshly. "When I mind how I showed her the madam's chamber; and how proud I was on the wedding-day of my cooking and all—sudden as it was and unlooked for, a finer wedding-breakfast was never set down to in a cleaner house, and I mixing the bride-cake at midnight! 'Twas ill-omened, I'm thinking."

"Tut, tut, daughter; 'tis not becoming in a Christian woman to speak of omens and the



like. Wait on the Lord, and be of good cheer. The Lord is mindful o' Maister Hugh, as he is ever mindful of his ain. Tho' there be times, I'm thinking, when he clean forgets that our thoughts are not as his thoughts, and that wi' us a thousand years is not as one day."

"There's not an hour of the day that I'm not praying for *him*, father," the woman said, in the low voice of passion. "But it would ease my mind wonderful if I could even give *her* a piece of it. She's a wicked woman—a wicked, light-minded woman, father! I wish she had never set eyes upon him; that I do!"

"Pray for the misguided lassie, too; she needs it," urged her father, gently. "Remember that where two of us are beseechin' the Lord for the one thing, it shall be done for us of our Father in heaven."

"And what petition do you put up for Mistress Ghent, father?" asked Permelia, dryly. "I haven't found it in my heart to lay her case before the Lord, as yet."

"Then do it immediate, daughter. I'm just beseechin' the Lord day by day to bring young Mistress Ghent to a realizin' sense o' her mercies. That's all any o' us needs at any time; for we're fair compassed about wi' the everlastin' mercies of Jehovah all the years o' our pilgrimage. But there's a special blessin' in store for that young woman, I'm thinkin', if so be she'll put out her hand and take it."

"If she'll not put out her hand and take it she's not deserving of it, I say," murmured Permelia, with an obstinate tightening of her kind mouth. "I'd just like her to see Master Hugh as I saw him but now. 'It's your doing, mistress,' I'd say to her, 'and may the Lord deal with you as you deal with him!' Yes, father, I would so. I would speak plain with her if I had the chance."

"There's times when plain speaking 's a good thing, an' I'll not deny it," said Andrew, thoughtfully. "When love an' wisdom guide the tongue, it is surely a good thing—a good thing!"

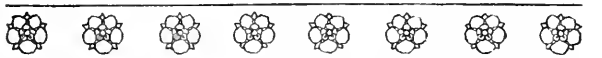
He went out, closing the door softly behind him, and Permelia betook herself to making a cheerful noise with dishes and silver and the clattering of fire-irons in the dining-room, singing the while in her rich, soft contralto the words of the morning hymn:

"Come, my soul, thou must be waking,
Now is breaking o'er the earth another day;
Come to Him who made this splendor; see thou render
All thy feeble thoughts can pay!"

And Hugh Ghent, opening his tired eyes upon the glory of the sun rising over leagues of gray, tossing sea, found it in his sore heart to pray for strength to endure that which was to come to him between the rising and the going down thereof. Than this can no man armor his soul more completely.

XIII

THE correlated thoughts and events which finally led Jerome Chantry into seeking an interview with Hugh Ghent need not be set down in their order. When one has fully determined upon a course of action, whether righteous or unrighteous, the stars in their courses appear to fight for him. And be it remembered that the younger Chantry was in no wise conscious of evil intent towards any human being. He had experienced little difficulty in fully convincing himself that his motives were beyond question. He had, he was confident, loved Mary for years; and in his mirror and his bank-account, as well as in the esteem of the public mind, he could find no adequate reason to doubt that she could be brought to love him in return.



But in justice to Jerome Chantry it should be stated that he seldom, if ever, considered Mary's attitude towards himself. He had lived long and blamelessly in the marriage relation before death intervened to widow him; and during those years of marital felicity he had become fully confirmed in his early and comfortable conviction with regard to women, which in no way differed from a strictly orthodox acceptation of the order of creation as set down in Scriptural text, written, translated, and interpreted by masculine minds especially accredited by the Almighty.

If Mary did not love him, plainly, she ought to love him; and whether she did or did not, the outcome concerned itself with his own wishes rather than with hers. In like easy and sweeping manner he had been enabled to set aside the shadowy claims of Hugh Ghent. But it had appeared to him as quite the gentlemanly and civil thing to do, to apprise Mr. Ghent of his intentions. It was therefore in this eminently charitable and Christian state

of mind that Mr. Chantry presented himself at the old Ghent homestead at as early an hour as comported with a careful toilet and a comfortable and copious breakfast. Mr. Chantry was most particular as to the care of his sentient bodily structure. He reflected with satisfaction that Mary should shortly participate in these privileges, and in due course profit by them.

It was cold in the country, and a biting wind swept in off the sea. Mr. Chantry's large face was quite purple with it by the time he dismounted stiffly from the slow-going stage which brought him from the station. As he brushed the clinging snow from his trousers legs, and sought for an immaculate, scented handkerchief wherewith to delicately caress his frost-nipped nose, he thoughtfully reviewed his case as he intended to present it to the owner of the house upon whose doorstep he was standing. Several telling sentences came to him after the bell had sounded within. It was, after all, so obvious a matter,

that a wayfaring man, though a fool, could not well err therein; and Hugh Ghent, he had been led to believe, was no fool, though he appeared unlearned in the ways of the world to a pitiable degree. He was sorry for Ghent, he told himself, benevolently, and he would do something handsome for him one of these days. He would indeed!

Glowing with these generous impulses, as well as with the nipping outer air, Mr. Chantry was presently introduced by Permelia McIlheny into Hugh Ghent's library, which served as his living-room as well. It was a large room, stretching quite across the house, with windows to the south and east commanding wide prospects of stormy sea and wind-swept land. Mr. Chantry comfortably planted on the hearth-rug, with coat-tails spread wide to the genial warmth, allowed his eyes to wander at ease over the bleak prospect without. He even smiled indulgently as he endeavored to picture Mary at home amid these rude surroundings. "Rude surroundings" being

the phrase which appeared to Mr. Chantry's mind as most fitting to describe the savage purple of the sea under the hurrying clouds, the naked trees, the distant pastures, and the nearer garden closes, forlorn and stripped of their summer boscage.

The room itself was "not so bad—not so bad!" he told himself, with a pleasant glow of patronage. Really, Ghent had contrived to make a very respectable place of it. To be sure, the bookcases, which filled every available wall-space, were obviously home-made; but there were two or three ancient prints, and one glowing bit of landscape upon which his commercial eye rested approvingly. The painted floor boasted a decent rug or so, and the heavy, old-fashioned mahogany sofa, with its pile of crimson cushions, drew a second approving glance. Mr. Chantry was quite prepared to be very gracious indeed to the owner of the room, and his plump face assumed its blandest society curves as he heard the heavy step of the master on the flags without.

Hugh Ghent had come directly from his labor in an adjoining bit of woodland, which he was clearing of underbrush. He did not excuse himself for his rude flannel shirt nor his heavy boots, which bore unmistakable traces of the ploughed ground across which he had come with haste at Permelia's summons. He brought with him into the warm room a wild breath of the sea and the cold earth which caused Mr. Chantry to draw a little nearer to the fire.

After the preliminary greetings a brief silence fell between the two men, during which Hugh Ghent deliberately scanned his visitor's face and figure with eyes as cold as the weather, and Jerome Chantry hastily reviewed his carefully prepared remarks. He had, curiously enough, forgotten a number of the telling phrases with which he had intended to introduce himself and his errand, in the presence of this tall and broad figure which confronted him.

"I—am here," he began, at last, "in the

character of—well, sir, as an emissary, if I may use the expression." He paused to glance inquiringly at the immobile face of his listener.

Hugh Ghent waited for him to go on.

Mr. Chantry coughed deprecatingly, then smiled slyly to himself. He was beginning to feel quite at his ease. "You may not be aware of the fact, but I am—that is, I hope I may be permitted to style myself—a very good friend of Miss—I should say of Mrs. Ghent's. I am, as you may be aware, a nephew of Judge Chantry's, and a frequent visitor at his house."

Hugh Ghent's unswerving blue eyes compelled him to continue.

"And—er—as such, I have, of course, been in the confidence of the family to the extent of knowing all that has taken place of late. I am now referring to Mary's unfortunate marriage."

Mr. Chantry was quick to perceive the uncontrollable quiver which passed over the rugged face of his listener, and the sight of it supplied him with courage for his next sentence.

"I use the word 'unfortunate' advisedly, Mr. Ghent, for a marriage which brings only embarrassment and sadness to either participant can hardly be regarded as otherwise. And—I regret to be obliged to tell you that Mary—is not—er—as happy as I—as her friends could wish to see her."

"Did my wife ask you to come here and tell me this?" demanded Hugh Ghent. His voice was harsh and insistent.

"Well—er—no; that is, hardly," stammered the other, thrown for an instant off his guard. "But you ought to know it, sir. Surely you ought to know it!"

"Yes, I ought to know it. Go on. My wife is unhappy, you say."

Mr. Chantry drew a quick breath; his greenish eyes narrowed to a slit. "I have been led to expect great magnanimity—not to say generosity—on your part, Mr. Ghent," he said, blandly. "And that is why—in short, sir, I may say that your previous magnanimity explains my presence in your house this morn-

ing." Jerome broadened his chest and passed a smooth hand over his sleek head with an air of purring complacency. He was feeling very well pleased with himself and his exquisite diplomacy.

"What can I do to help her?" demanded Hugh Ghent, fixing his sombre eyes upon his visitor. "If you know, tell me."

"You can release her!" cried Chantry, with dramatic suddenness. "You can stand out of the way of a better man!"

"And that better man—?"

"Is myself. Why should I not say it? I loved her before you ever set eyes upon her. The marriage between us was arranged, as definitely as a marriage can be in America. I knew how immature, how almost childish, she was, therefore I waited her time, as many another man has waited. I was resolved not to hurry her—though God knows I could ill afford to wait for a wife at my time of life. And while I stood one side, in order not to intrude myself upon her over soon, you stepped

in and bound her to yourself, without consulting her guardian or friends. It was a damnable outrage, and—and I hold you accountable!"

"Does she love you?"

Jerome Chantry's pale eyes fell before the fierce question, and the leap and tug of leashed passions behind it.

"Oh, as to that, you know," he began, lamely, "I—I am—er—waiting for her to be legally unembarrassed before I urge the question. There would be a certain diffidence, you understand, a certain delicacy, to a—to such a man as myself, under the circumstances, in putting so pointed an inquiry. I am a Christian gentleman, sir; a church-warden, in short, and I beg to remind you that I recognize all the—er—proprieties due to the peculiar situation."

"Then you have not as yet proposed marriage to my wife?"

"No—most certainly not, sir!"

"Thank you."

"I shall wait until — well, until you —" Jerome completed his halting sentence with a darting glance of inquiry at the other's impassive face.

"You may tell my wife that when I receive from her a request for release, it shall be given, immediately and unconditionally."

"But—"

"She must ask me for her release," continued Hugh Ghent, with stern immobility. "When she has done this I shall release her, and not before. Do you understand?"

Jerome Chantry stood up and buttoned his coat. His face had become curiously mottled with dim, purplish spots, his plump hands trembled visibly.

"You have made a most embarrassing condition, sir," he said. "Mary is a peculiarly sensitive woman, as you are probably not aware. But as one who knows her well—indeed, intimately—I may say that I consider your condition as almost cruelly unjust. A man of fine feeling—a gentleman, in short—

would offer her an unconditional release from claims which have no real foundation in fact or fancy."

Hugh Ghent had also risen and was staring at his visitor with savage intentness. His large hands were clenched behind his back. "You are mistaken in one thing," he said, deliberately, "my claims have a foundation."

"Indeed! and may I inquire as to its nature?" sneered the other.

"I love my wife. That is my one and only claim. But I am prepared to defend it against every human being but herself. Now do you understand me?"

Jerome Chantry allowed a slight, insulting smile to lift the corners of his thin lips. "A most extraordinary claim, I should say, under the circumstances," he said, softly. He turned and made for the door, then paused. "I think," he added, with distinct and careful politeness, "that we fully understand each other. I shall undertake, with pleasure, to procure from—er—Mrs. Ghent the request

which you are pleased to require, and which you have agreed to honor. The rest will follow in due time. I am glad to have met you, and to have had the opportunity for this—er—very interesting conversation. I will bid you good-day, sir!"

Hugh Ghent took a single forward step, his blue eyes blazing with unguarded fury; but the door had already closed upon his uninvited guest. After a pause, during which he stood before his fire, plunged deep in unhappy meditation, he left the house by way of the kitchen.

"Don't wait dinner for me, Permelia," he called out to the woman, whose soft, dark eyes hung upon his movements like those of a faithful dog. "I'm going up to the hill lot to chop wood. I sha'n't be home till dark."

"Eh—Master Hugh!" expostulated Miss McIlheny, "but you'll let me put you up a bit of lunch, won't you, just a slice of cold beef and a—"

But he was already out of hearing, his tall

figure swinging along against the darkening sky, from which occasional hard, compacted kernels of snow were beginning to drift upon the bitter wind.

"May the Lord help him!" ejaculated the woman, with pious fervor. She stood by the window, wiping her eyes from time to time with her gingham apron. "May the Lord help him!" she repeated; "and—and *her!*" she added, grudgingly, as she turned once more to her interrupted tasks.

As old Andrew McIlheny went about his duties on that same day, he was conscious of a great burden of prayer and supplication which had descended upon him out of the unseen. His lips moved soundlessly, and in his heart were those deeper groanings of spirit which may not be uttered in word or sigh. From a human and practical standpoint, Mr. McIlheny was forced to acknowledge that his young master had been guilty of a grievous folly.

"Thou knowest, Lord, that Maister Hugh

should have taken counsel wi' me," he complained, in the undisputed privacy of the great barn. "I could have advised him to his profit. But now that he is fair stalled in the miry clay of his own self-will, an' I can do naught to help him, do thou, Lord, come to his relief an' deliver him!"

From the spot where he was actively engaged in shucking corn, Mr. McIlheny witnessed the arrival of Jerome Chantry, and also his departure. "'Tis something evil to do wi' *her*," he divined, prophetically, and gave himself to renewed supplications. "His horn hath he exalted like the horn of a unicorn," he muttered, as his stern eye fell upon Jerome Chantry's portly form, surmounted by a tall silk hat; "but it shall be brought low! He also that hath waxed fat in his iniquity shall be made lean. Ay, go thy ways," he continued, as the gate closed after the flushed and wrathful Chantry, "our God will defend Maister Hugh against all such as take counsel against him to disturb his peace. Yet I doubt if a

word of honest counsel from me will come amiss."

He pondered the matter while the pile of husked corn was growing, and at noon made little answer to the gentle patter of Permelia's conversation, while she complained at length of Hugh working without food in the bitter weather.

"A sore heart needs the company of a full stomach, I'm thinking; he should have come home to his dinner," she said, "more especial as the man was the bearer of evil tidings, and I cooked a chicken because of him."

"How should you know the man's errand in the house?" demanded her father.

"How should I know—eh? Well, father, there be many ways of knowing what goes on behind closed doors; my ears are keen to hear what concerns Master Hugh, and their voices were loud. He came asking a release for her. Now what think you of Mistress Ghent? She herself comes not, but sends such a man. May the Lord help her!"

"Amen to that, daughter; and He will help her," said Andrew, devoutly.

"Stay a little, father, while I put up dinner for Master Hugh," urged Permelia; "you must take it to him in the upper wood lot. And, father, see that he eats it, will you? He has no call to perish with hunger because of a foolish woman. Oh, but I pray God I may have the chance to say to her what is in my heart, before I die!"

"See that your heart is filled with love before ever you speak," advised Andrew. "Out of the angry heart come mischiefs innumerable to plague the world. A woman's heart is often angry, and therefore her lips speak foolishness; but," he added, complacently, "in the heart of a man is wisdom."

The scattered snow-flakes of the morning had already thickened to a dizzying whirl; the frozen clods were fast whitening, and to the windward of leaf-strewn thickets the first drifts of winter were rearing airy superstructures upon the strong foundations of frozen sleet.

"'Twill be a bitter winter," meditated old Andrew to himself as he trudged along.

The sharp, ringing blows of an axe reached his ear long before he came to the upper wood lot where Hugh was at work. "'Tis ill working against sorrow," he muttered; "yet to labor even in bitterness of soul is better than to be idle."

He stood for a while watching the young man before making his quiet presence known. Hugh had cast aside his coat, and was wielding his axe with dogged, unsparing energy. Mr. McIlheny observed with amazement that he was attacking the great trunk of a hickory which had been long cherished with especial pride.

"Eh—Maister Hugh, you're cutting the big hickory at last!" he exclaimed. "I was thinking that tree was to be spared for the joy of future generations. It's many and many a time you've told me so, and your father before you."

Hugh dropped his axe to the ground with a

thud. "I didn't notice what I was cutting," he said, dully. "It makes no difference anyway; there'll be no one to care after me."

"Now, Maister Hugh," said the old man, resolutely, as he advanced and set down his basket, "I'll trouble you to put on your coat against the cold whilst you listen to me. You've neither faither nor mither to counsel you, but I've a word for you in my heart that will out. It's lain there unsaid for many days, but the Lord hath shapen it in secret o'er long; 'tis ready to be uttered now, and you shall hear it whether you will or no. Here also is food."

Hugh scowled at the basket. "Say what you have to say and be done with it," he said, roughly. "I am in no mood for talk."

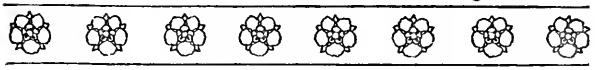
"Keep your ain counsel, then," retorted the old man, sharply; "but I have this much to say to you—lad: if you love the woman you call wife, go to her and tell her so."

"She'll not listen to me," groaned Hugh.

"There's no woman living who will not

listen to the tale of an honest man's love. But it should be spoken wi' power, and wi' the knowledge back o' it that you are claimin' what God has already given into your keepin'. The lassie is yours by the grace and favor o' the Almighty. Take her, then, and let no man say you nay. She will not say you nay, Maister Hugh, if she be true woman, and I find it in my heart to say that she is no other. Now I have spoken my word, an' I'll not add to it. You will even do as you are pleased to do; but I would that you eat and be refreshed; and may the Lord bless you, Maister Hugh, as he blessed your faither before you; and may he cause his face to shine upon *her* as it shone upon the soul o' your mither. So shall ye both be kept safe in the arms o' the Everlastin' Love!"

"But there was no talk of love between us," objected Hugh, staring at the old man with haggard eyes. "I was demented—crazy, I think now. God knows I meant purely by her; but now she cries out like an innocent



creature sorely hurt by a savage trap. I must let her go. There is no other way."

"Marriage is no trap to hurt the tenderest bit lassie o' them all," said Andrew, gently. "Rather is it a strong fold, fashioned to keep out the cold o' the warld an' the sting o' it—ay, an' the wolf also, who comes not save to kill and to destroy."

"But this was like no other marriage," sighed Hugh. "It is true that I hoped—"

"Hopin' is good, Maister Hugh; but you must even claim your own if you would possess it," interrupted the old man, strongly. "If you will not, another will take it from you. 'Tis the law in all things under heaven; I've seen and proved it."

"I will write to her," said Hugh, at last, heaving a great breath of pain, which floated and vanished spirit-like in the frosty air.

"Go to her," urged Andrew. "The spoken word is aye best. Go to her now."

The young man picked up his axe. "Leave

me, Andrew," he ordered, curtly. "I must think further of what you have said."

He could not bring himself to speak of the unanswered letter, but the memory of it lay like a stone upon his heart.

"If she had cared for me," he thought, bitterly, "she would have asked me to come."

XIV

THE hand of God deals gently with each of his children, but most gently of all with the sleeping soul of a woman; touching her closed eyelids with caressing finger-tips of dawn, bringing her by slow and exquisite degrees to a knowledge of the day, which is the external day of love, that day which can never be utterly clouded by mortal night nor lost in the soundless abysses of death. If there be anything that shall endure from everlasting to everlasting, it is love. And herein is a mystery not to be wholly known from eternity to eternity, for it is eternity itself, and the sum of all things that have been, that are, and that are to be.

Mary could have explained to no one, least of all to herself, the subtle process by which

all other images in her soul were replaced by one, upon which she gazed in silence. She was not yet wholly aware that she loved her husband; she knew only that his face was always before her, that she longed for it with a strange and painful longing; that his voice sounded in her ears by night and by day; and that life without him appeared dead and worthless.

Yet she was none the less resolved upon her original project. Because he expected her to go to Hawaii, she was bound to go there by every strong, compelling impulse of her soul.

Felice Vivian, no longer indeed the central sun of her girlish firmament, had become its pallid moon, and to her she turned yearningly in this strange, new turmoil of soul, which had come upon her unawares.

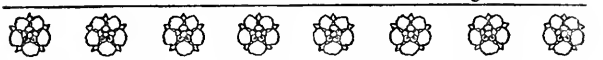
"We shall go soon now, Felice," she wrote. "You must come to me here, and we will arrange everything for our immediate departure at the beginning of the year. I am longing so to be gone—to be doing what we must do. Every night I mark off the day on the calendar

—the way we used to do when we were in college and waiting for the holidays. Do you remember, dear?"

Miss Vivian did remember, and stamped her small foot in a sudden access of impatience. Then she put forth many sheets of violet-tinted paper and sat her down with a very becoming pucker between her pretty brows to her task of final disillusionment.

"My dear old Honey-pot" [she began, remorsefully], "I hardly know how to tell you what I must tell you; but it's got to be said, and the sooner the better. I've been hoping and waiting for something to happen *far different* for you, Mary. I did think you would see after a while the difference between a stiff, pokerish college president—for the sweetest of them are bound to grow stiff and pokerish in the course of years, you know; they simply can't help it—and *the best beloved of a best beloved.* That is the only real, true life for a woman, Mary. And you can be that, dear; you ought to be that!

"Really, when I think of everything, I wonder at you. I believe if you could have seen the way



he snatched at your letters—just as a starving man would snatch at bread—even your stony heart would have been touched.

"The queer thing about it all to *me* is that your heart isn't really stony—not one bit! You're just made to be loved and to love, Mary; and when I think of the sweet affection you've lavished upon me all these years, I feel like a wretch! For I can't go to Hawaii with you. There, the truth is out at last! I've been dreading to tell you, and expecting all sorts of wild things to turn up. (Hasn't he written to you?)

"In the first place, daddy wouldn't allow it. He says it's utterly foolish for two girls of our age to even think of attempting such a thing. He says that if a college for women is ever built in Hawaii—which he doubts, but I don't—it must be done by the people themselves, and because they want it. There are lots of rich planters and merchants there, who could do for the Hawaiian girls what Matthew Vassar and Henry Durant did for us; and it's their place to do it.

"I put daddy's veto first, because—well, because I dread to tell you the other reason. But, honey, you know I've warned you all along that you were

leaning on a broken reed in *me*. I do love you, dear, even more than in the old days when we were in college together; but there's no use of denying that I love somebody else better. Perhaps you've guessed it already; I've tried to make you ask me questions, and I've all but told you a dozen times. If you weren't so—so blind, you dear old honey-pot, you would have seen long ago that I loved Henry Caldwell. Please forgive me, dear; I couldn't help it, and *I wouldn't help it if I could!* I see so much clearer than I used to do, and I *know*, Mary, that there isn't any happiness half so dear as the happiness I have now, and to think that this is only the beginning!

"I want you to be my maid of honor, Mary—or, rather, my matron of honor. You'll have to be that, won't you? The wedding will take place in January, and you must come and stay with me at least a month beforehand; because we are going abroad on our wedding-tour, and Henry says we may not return for a year. I want you to see my house, too. Oh, Mary! I shall have such *oceans* to tell you, when you have said you forgive me for disappointing you so!

"Away down deep in my heart of hearts I can't

believe I am disappointing you so very much. If you'll only call things by their right names, Mary, you'll see that you don't want to sail for the Sandwich Islands any more than I do. What you really want is— But I leave this for you to find out for yourself. *Do try, honey!*

"With heaps and heaps of love, your always devoted FELICE."

"There!" murmured Miss Vivian, with a great sigh of relief. "I'm thankful that's off my mind! Yes, mother dear"—answering a maternal tap at the door—"I'm coming right away! Did you say Miss Gubbins advises Valenciennes or the French hand-embroidery on that petticoat? I think I should like both —no, not on the same petticoat, dear, but on another. I shall need heaps of them, you know. I've written to Mary, mother, and I've asked her to spend a month with me before the wedding; but, honestly, I sha'n't cry if she doesn't come. She is so—well, so *wearing;* and I know I ought to save myself all I can. It's my duty!"

"I don't approve of Mary," chirped Mrs. Vivian, comfortably. "But your father admires her. He says all she needs is a firm hand over her to develop her into a really fine woman. Your father is *so* masterful; I have always had to *manage* him with *the greatest tact!*"

Felice giggled pleasantly. "Daddy is an old dear," she said, with decision, "and he is quite right about Mary. But she'll never think of such a thing as 'managing' her husband. She'll just glory in being mastered, if the time ever comes."

"I'm sure I hope so," sighed Mrs. Vivian. "She hasn't a particle of tact."

Mary read Felice's letter the next morning, and shed a few quiet tears over it. That they were tears of resignation rather than of bitter disappointment she vaguely realized. But it would be still lonelier in Hawaii without Felice. She grew very pale as she contemplated her own inexorable resolution. Then, for perhaps the hundredth time, she read her husband's letter.

"I wonder," she said, aloud, "if this is an 'evil' or 'annoyance.' He said that I should tell him when that day came; and I should so like to tell him!"

Timidly she raised his letter to her lips; then all glowing with lovely shame bowed her face upon it. She was slowly pondering Felice's words, "If you could have seen the way he snatched at your letters — just as a starving man would snatch at bread!"

"If he had—asked me to write to him," she sighed.

That same afternoon Jerome Chantry called. It was quite characteristic of Mary that it had not occurred to her to refuse to see him on the occasions of his frequent visits. She came into the room with a light in her eyes and a delicate flush of color in her serious face, which stirred Jerome's middle-aged pulses to a quicker beat.

"She is growing more beautiful every day," he told himself, exultantly. She would be stunningly handsome as Mrs. Chantry, gowned

as Mrs. Chantry should be gowned. His eyes roved over her tall, slight figure with the coolly critical gaze of proprietorship. He was thinking of a certain sumptuous ermine-lined garment he had chanced to notice in a furrier's window that day. It would suit the future Mrs. Chantry admirably.

He detained her hand in his own smooth palm, while he said, "I have something important to tell you, Mary."

She did not reply; but her troubled eyes fell before his ardent gaze.

Jerome noted this with approval. He felt that it augured well for his success. "I have been out of town to-day in this bitter weather," he began, cautiously; "I very nearly congealed en route, upon my word; yet I'm glad I went, and I hope you will be, Mary. I—er—have had an interview with your—with the person who succeeded in persuading you into that extremely ill-advised marriage last summer. I refer, of course, to Mr. Ghent."

"You have seen him!"

He perceived the quick start of amazement and the tide of rosy color which swept over the girl's fair face, and interpreted it according to his inmost convictions, which were, as usual, entirely complimentary to himself.

"Is he—? Did you—?" stammered Mary, piteously. The tumultuous beating of her heart choked her. She clenched her slender hands tightly in her lap, and took refuge in silence.

"I had a most important interview with Ghent this morning," went on Mr. Chantry, broadening his chest impressively; "one which I trust will result in your future happiness and permanent well-being, Mary—I need not add that both are most dear to me! It will be unnecessary, I think, for me to enter at length into all the details of that interview, I will merely state—" He paused to feast his eyes greedily upon the lovely, appealing face of his listener.

"Is he—well?" asked Mary, timidly.

The man pursed up his lips frowningly. "I

confess that I take no particular interest in Ghent beyond— But, of course, I—er—appreciate your motives in inquiring. Really, it is awfully good of you to ask, Mary; the fellow doesn't deserve it."

"But is he—well? You—you saw him?"

"Hum — ah — he seemed well enough, I should say. I never saw the man before, and, by Jove, I hope I'll never run across him again!" Mr. Chantry scowled reminiscently.

Mary eyed him anxiously. "Did he—seem —very—unhappy?" she asked.

"I should say that was neither here nor there!" cried Mr. Chantry, warmly; "though it's like you, Mary, to have thought of inquiring. Upon my word, I don't believe there's another woman of my acquaintance who would have done it—under the—er—circumstances, you know. But I like to see a woman kind-hearted and considerate; I do, indeed!"

He leaned back comfortably in his chair at the conclusion of this speech, and regarded

his listener with a pleasantly indulgent expression of countenance. "Do you know," he observed, softly, "that you've been growing handsome tremendously fast of late? You're not the same woman you were six months ago. It's astonishing!"

Mary flashed a look of haughty displeasure at him from under lowered lids.

"Why did you go to see my husband?" she demanded, coldly.

"I've already told you why I went," responded Jerome. He seemed lost in admiration of the charming face before him, upon which he gazed uninterruptedly. "It was entirely on your behalf, Mary; and I was successful—perfectly successful. Ghent is quite ready to release you from even the shadowy claim he has upon you. I was pleased to find him, upon the whole, so reasonable. He's a disagreeable chap though, very!"

Mary's face whitened slowly. "You—you asked him to—to *release* me?" she faltered. "What right had you?—how dared you?"

Jerome seized his opportunity with the headlong impetuosity of a younger man. "I have the right of one who has loved you long and devotedly," he murmured, fervently. "I dared because you are unhappy. Can you deny it, Mary?"

"I—"

"You are unhappy, dear girl. I could not help but see it. I told Ghent so, and he—"

Her face suddenly glowed once more with lovely color.

"You—you told him that I was unhappy?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Certainly, I told him so—and very plainly. I'm not one to mince my words when there's an important issue at stake."

"What did he—say?"

"He said—as any decent fellow would have said, under like circumstances—'What can I do to help her?'"

"And—then?"

"And then I said to him, 'It is your plain duty to release her.' He agreed to this. He

was reasonable enough, as I said, but deucedly disagreeable and churlish. I finally told him he was no gentleman. He drove me to it. But I got the better of him at last, though!"

Mary's white teeth were clenched upon her lower lip. "How could you! Oh, how could you!" she cried.

Mr. Chantry's shrewd attention became suddenly riveted upon her. "Do you know," he said, at last, "I can't quite understand the way you're taking this, Mary. It is quite impossible that you should care anything for Ghent after the way he has treated you."

"I—I— He was very good to me, and I—"

The man's eyes searched her pallid face. "I asked him point-blank if he cared for you," he went on, deliberately. "I love you, Mary, and I made no secret of the fact to him—I put the question plainly, for I felt it was my duty to do so before pushing my claims."

"And he—he said—?"

The girl's voice was a low wail of pain.

Jerome Chantry leaned forward in his chair; his voice was caressing and full of pity. "Tell me this one thing, Mary—did Ghent ever tell you that he—er—loved you? Did he ever speak one word of the sort to you?"

"No—oh no!"

"Then listen to me, my poor girl; he never will tell you so. He is perfectly willing to release you. I have his word for it. He demands only that you shall ask for your release. The marriage, as I understand it, was contracted solely for your own benefit and convenience; and Ghent ungenerously insists that you shall humiliate yourself to the extent of asking him for its undoing. I am sorry for you, Mary; it cuts me to the heart to see you grieve. And I beg to assure you that I did my best to move him from his resolution, but in vain. He is a churlish fellow—a sullen, resentful—"

"Stop!" cried Mary. She was trembling violently, but she faced him with a sort of frozen calm.

Jerome deliberately unfolded a large, white paper which he produced from an inner pocket.

"I have been at some pains to make it all as easy as possible for you, Mary," he said, compassionately. "I knew how you would feel regarding the matter, and I said as much to Ghent. 'Mary is a proud and sensitive woman,' I said; 'she will suffer under this cruel demand of yours.' But he was inexorable. Now I have drawn up a paper here which I am going to ask you to sign. It is merely a brief but exact compliance with his demand, and your signature will be all that is required to render it effective. Everything else can be quickly arranged, and it shall be done with just as little annoyance to you as possible. You may trust me, dear girl, to look out for that!"

He was stooping over her almost caressingly, the paper in one hand, a fountain-pen in the other. Mary could feel his heated breath upon her cheek. She seemed strangely bound,

stupefied, helpless in the coils of his determined will.

"You may sign here," he murmured, softly, and pressed the pen into her cold hand. "Be brave, dearest, for my sake and your own!"

She started to her feet with a gasping moan, pushing him from her with a violent gesture of repulsion.

"I love him!" she cried. "God help me—I love him!"

Once more he stood listening to her hurrying feet upon the stair, a look of beastlike fear and hatred distorting his large face. Then, quite calmly and deliberately, he stooped to search for and recover his fountain-pen, which Mary had swept from his hand; he examined its nib with anxious concern, restored it to its case, and the case to his pocket.

This much accomplished, he smiled thoughtfully. The smile was not a pleasant thing to behold. Even Peters was startled by it, as he majestically showed Mr. Chantry to the door.

"'E's a devilish deep sort o' a chap, I'm thinkin'!" reflected Peters, as he fingered the bank-note Mr. Chantry had pressed into his hand on entering the house. "I wonder what 'e's up to with Miss Mary; that I do! Poor little Missy; the' don't seem to be anybody to take 'er part!"

XV

ANOTHER woman in Mary's case might have sought sanctuary among the pillows of her bed, and there abandoned herself to that ecstasy of hysterical weeping which leaves its victim nerveless and inert, a mere drifting bit of wreckage in the boiling torrent of human passion.

But Mary stood by her bedroom fire, tall and still and tearless, reviewing all that had passed between Jerome Chantry and herself. Then, by slow degrees, she became conscious of an overmastering desire to see her husband. "He will know what I ought to do," she reminded herself, with a passionate faith in his truth which a more ignoble nature could scarce have understood. "Even though he does not love me, he will help me do what I must do. I shall tell him—everything."

The light of the winter afternoon was already waning when she passed out of the wide hall under the discreet surveillance of Peters.

"Won't you have the carriage, miss?" he ventured, touched vaguely by some unknown appeal in her troubled face. "It's biting cold outside."

She hesitated. "Will you tell Mr. Chantry for me, Peters, that I am going away for several hours," she said. "I ought perhaps to have written him a word of explanation; but no matter. I may not return until late; but he is not to worry about me. I shall be perfectly safe."

Then she was gone, her slight figure hurrying down the street in the pink light of approaching sunset.

Peters wondered, respectfully, where the young lady might be going so fast; then shortly dismissed the matter by a still further exercise of that valuable function of mind which had earned and retained for him his eminently

respectable position in Judge Chantry's household.

There were many trains passing out of the great railway station at this hour of the day. Mary found a place in one of them. She was unreasoningly glad, now that she had started to go to him, and her mind, quickened beyond its wont, was going back over the past, reviewing—examining all that had happened in this new and wonderful flood of light which had poured down upon her out of the unseen. She thought confusedly of her wedding-day, and of the solemn questions of the little minister. He had answered them clearly and firmly! He had promised—what? The significance of this hitherto unthought of fact suddenly dawned upon her. He had promised to *love* her. *He had promised!* And afterward he had said— What was it that he had said? She held her breath in her effort to recall the scene quite clearly.

"I promised—yes; but you did not promise, Mary. There is no lie between us."

She hid her face in her hands in a sudden tremor of hope and fear.

And then—suddenly, it seemed to her—the short journey was over. She stepped down onto the familiar platform in the red light of the winter evening, which gleamed cold and strange on snow-shrouded fields and woods and on the empty road, stretching away like a soiled ribbon into twilight distances.

A solitary figure in great-coat and muffler was stooping to examine a pile of boxes left by the vanishing train. After a moment's hesitation Mary approached this figure, which seemed somehow to have taken to itself the cold remoteness of the landscape.

"Can you tell me," she asked, timidly, "when the Petler's Cove stage will start?"

The man spat deliberately in the drift, then turned to face her. "The' ain't no stage to-night," he said, laconically.

"But there was always a stage to meet this train," persisted Mary. "I know, because this is the train I came on last June."

The man whistled softly, and turned over another box.

"Won't you tell me, please," she repeated.

"I've told ye a'ready," retorted the man; "but, o' course, if you know better 'an I do what goes on at this 'ere station, why, 'tain't fer me t' instruct ye."

"Then there isn't any stage?"

"That's what I said!" He raised his voice as if speaking to a person at a distance. "The's a summer schedule fer stages, an' the's a winter schedule; it bein' the winter season, we're a-runnin' the winter schedule till further notice."

"Will you tell me how I can get over to the Cove?" Mary's voice trembled a little as she put the question. She remembered vaguely that she had eaten no luncheon. "You have a telephone?" she added, with hopeful afterthought.

"Gosh, no!" replied the man, with a grimace; "what on earth 'd I do with a telephone? —all alone here, an' everythin' an' more too,

a-doin'; ha'f the women-folks in the country 'd be plaguin' me with their everlastin' questions 'bout nothin'. I made 'em yank the goll-darned thing out, come fall. You bet Seth Van Housen ain't got no use fer telephones 'round these parts in winter—not ef he knows it!"

"Is there any way for me to get to the Cove?"

The man stood up and surveyed the girl with an air of leisurely wonder. He was an old man, wrinkled and weather-beaten, and his small, deep-set eyes twinkled with a sort of fretful humor. "Where do ye want t' go, miss?" he asked, in a more respectful tone than he had yet employed.

"I am going to Mr. Ghent's house. Do you know where it is?" urged Mary.

"I sure *do!*" replied the man. "It's 'bout four miles f'om here b' the road—not more'n two miles an' a ha'f as the crow flies. Guess you'd better keep to th' road, though, seein' you ain't growed any wings yit." He paused to chuckle dryly at his own conceit. "Keep

t' th' road," he went on, authoritatively, "tell ye git t' the red school-house. D' ye know where the school-house is?"

"Yes," answered Mary, "I remember it."

"Wal', when ye strike the school-house ye take yer first right, then yer first left. Ghent's place is the third on the Pequot cross-road—big stone house; you know it when ye see it—eh?"

"Yes—oh yes!" breathed the girl.

She buried her hands deep in her muff and stepped eagerly down into the snowy road.

"Don't ye fergit what I tol' ye," called the man after her; "take yer first right just beyond the school-house, then yer first left; an' Ghent's house—"

She was walking rapidly now, the snow creaking noisily under her feet. She turned and waved her muff at the man, in token that she understood, then hurried on with bent head.

The old station-master stood still on the platform for a long minute, staring after the

slight figure. "I dunno as I'd ought t' 'ave let her start out all alone like that," he said, addressing the surrounding silence. "But gracious! I can't be botherin' with every female woman that comes along askin' foolish questions. 'Tain't what I'm a-drawin' m' wages fer."

It was bitter cold, and a great silence seemed to brood over the twilight land. Mary stopped for an instant to listen, in a sudden childish panic of fear. There was neither sound nor motion; the frost crystals which fringed the bowed weeds at the road-side sparkled diamond clear in the pale light of the young moon; the stars shone resplendent in the vast blue dark overhead. Snow and silence and the cold lights of a far-away heaven—she buried her stiffened face in her muff as if to shut out the sight; then hurried forward in the slippery, broken track left by infrequent sleigh-runners in the soft snow.

It was almost impossible to make rapid progress, and her long skirts, weighted with

the clinging snow, flapped heavily about her limbs. After what seemed a weary age of struggling effort, she reached the red schoolhouse. The man had said, "Take the first right beyond the school; after that the first left." She would soon be there, and then—

She strove to picture the old house as it would look in winter — a warm vision of a blazing hearth, before which he would be sitting alone, rising unbidden before her. He would welcome her; she was sure of it; he had said, "This is your home from henceforth, Mary." Her home, and she was hastening toward it, cold and hungry and weary—longing for its peace and shelter, and for the sight of its master's face as she had never yet longed for anything in her short life. It would be like heaven, she thought, weakly, to meet him here upon this bleak and difficult road. How she would cry out to him — yes, and cling to him, secure in the remembrance of his promise.

Then she stopped, bewildered; two roads

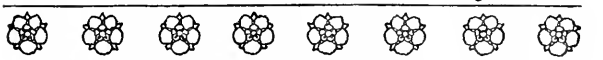
stretched away from a broken finger-post, hoary with frost crystals, to the right of the main track, and were lost to sight in the glimmering dusk beyond. After a moment of hesitation she chose the lower road, which presently led her through a patch of lonely woods. It seemed to her that she remembered the woods, with the broken rail-fences on either side overrun with bushes and long, snow-laden brambles. Her feet ached cruelly with the cold; she breathed with difficulty in the frosty air. "I ought to have hired a carriage at the station," she told herself, regretfully, then pressed on as fast as her strong young limbs could carry her.

The track grew fainter as she followed it; in places the snow had blown in fantastic windrows across the road, quite obliterating it; she struggled through them determinedly. Just beyond she was sure she could make out the dim outlines of a house against the bleak hill-side. She approached it hopefully, though its low, dark windows gave forth no cheerful

token to the night. There were masses of unpruned bushes crowding the unbroken path which led to the front door; the sagging roof of the veranda supported a great curling drift which sparkled in the keen light of the stars.

Then she saw that the door stood open into the black darkness beyond, where the drift had ventured in before her and lay in glimmering wreaths on the broken floor. She cried out in shivering dismay. She remembered the place now; she had visited it with a merry party of young people in the warmth and riotous cheerfulness of a July day. It was called, in the parlance of the countryside, "the haunted house on the hill," to distinguish it from another deserted cabin near the beach, known as "the haunted house in the cove."

She hurried back to the road once more, tears of pure fright and fear running down her cold cheeks. "Oh, Hugh!" she cried aloud—"Hugh! where are you?"



It seemed to her excited fancy that she could hear a voice calling to her in reply. She ran wildly down the snowy road, stumbling weakly and crying as she went.

XVI

THERE are those who will tell you that the brain of man is an infinitely fine, infinitely powerful machine, capable of producing currents of energy which ray out in countless divergent streams, crossing and recrossing in the circumambient ether like the myriad service-wires of a great city, yet each conveying its message, true and unbroken, from sender to receiver. If this is, in truth, a dimly apprehended fact, scientifically demonstrable, it ought by every right of mankind to engage the most earnest attention of the great body of our scientific explorers.

But whether so marvellous a function of brain be meant to serve universal ends in the present world or not, it remains an indisputable fact that upon rare occasions the

brain does so act, transmitting and receiving vibrations which, translated into thought, may or may not be recognized by the consciousness as foreign to itself.

Thus to Hugh Ghent, wielding his axe in the upper wood lot and nursing bitter thoughts of disillusionment, came the subtle intimation of Mary's sore and pressing need of his presence. He disputed the intruder for a hard-fought hour, referring it to the well-meant advice of old McIlheny. But in the end he yielded.

"Make ready to drive me to the station for the six-forty train," he directed Andrew; then carried dire dismay to Permelia's housewifely soul by a sudden demand for a week's supply of clean linen, and supper to be prepared and eaten, in the space of half an hour.

"And where might you be going so sudden and unexpected, Master Hugh?" inquired Miss McIlheny, with the freedom born of long and unstinted service both of heart and of body.

"I am going to town on important business," he told her, briefly, as he buttoned himself into his great-coat.

"And when will you come home?"

"That I can't tell you," he called back, over his shoulder. "Perhaps to-morrow; perhaps in a week's time—I can't say."

But old Andrew was not to be put off so masterfully. "You'll be takin' my advice, Maister Hugh, I'm thinkin'?" he began, guilelessly, as the sleigh jingled slowly through the deep drifts of the carriage-drive into the track of the high-road. "An' I thank the Lord for it," he added, fervently. "Sound an' wholesome advice is na so easily come by as some folk would have us believe. The counsel of the godly is like strong meat; but the advice of fools tendeth to leanness. She'll listen to ye gladly, lad, an' ye'll find it so."

"She must listen to me, whether gladly or not, I cannot say. But she shall listen."

"Ay, you're in the right o' it, Maister Hugh, 'shall' an' 'must' be strong, fine words to use

in dealin' wi' women an' bairns. They need bindin' to the heart wi' cords o' might as well as of love. I ken it weel."

Hugh was silent, his head sunk deep in the collar of his coat.

"'Tis a bitter night," crooned old Andrew, after a silence filled with the monotonous ringing of the harness-bells and the plud, plud of the old mare's hoofs in the crisp snow. "Woe be to ony tender thing abroad this night; ay, the lambs an' young cattle an' a' such should be folded close when the black frost is abroad in the land."

Hugh laid a sudden, impetuous grasp upon the reins. "Stop!" he commanded.

An unbroken silence lay upon the glimmering fields which stretched away to the black ocean on one side, and to the low-lying hills dim with forests on the other.

"There is naething," said Andrew, and clucked cheerfully to the restive mare. "We must make haste or lose the train, I'm thinkin'." As he spoke, the echoing shriek of an

approaching locomotive sounded afar off among the hills.

"I've a mind to wait till to-morrow," mused Hugh, turning a long, uneasy look back over the road.

"What was the sound ye heard like?" inquired Mr. McIlheny, respectfully.

"You'll think I'm a fool, Andrew, but it was like her voice, calling me," answered Hugh, with a quick shiver.

"'Twas your own fancy, lad, ringing its love changes in your ears," observed old Andrew quaintly. "I remember weel how when I was coortin' m' wife every breeze spoke her name—Jeanie, it was—an' I give you my word, Maister Hugh, I heard it i' the bells o' the cattle an' the crowin' o' the cocks. It was aye Jeanie—Jeanie a' the day lang."

Hugh turned once more and looked long and earnestly into the luminous night. "I have a dread of going," he muttered; then with a hasty good-bye leaped to the platform and boarded the waiting train.

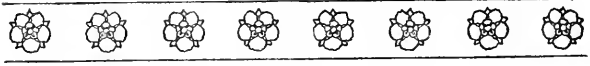
"May the Lord o' Hosts go wi' him an' strengthen him mightily!" ejaculated Andrew fervently. Then he climbed stiffly out of the sleigh, drew a blanket over the smoking flanks of the mare, and approached the station-master, who stood flapping his long arms about his chest in a cloud of steamy breath.

"Ye'll mind the box o' beehives i' the flat I was expectin' last week, Van Hoosen; has it come to han' yet?"

"So it's you—eh, McIlheny? No, sir, the' ain't no hair ner hide of a box come fer ye yit. I guess them folks in the city think the' ain't no special rage fer beehives in zero weather."

"Beehives i' the flat was what I ordered," said Mr. McIlheny, mildly. "I have the leisure now an' the desire to set them up an' paint them, an' put the wax i' the frames against the summer-time. There's nae time to do it when spring opens. Time an' tide an' the swarmin' o' bees waits for nae man."

"Guess you're 'bout right, Andrew, es usual!" drawled Mr. Van Hoosen. "I see



you got company to your house, even 'f 'tis cold weather. I tell ye these 'ere city folks knows where to go fer real comfort an' plenty o' good vittles, summer or winter! Friend o' Permely's—eh?"

"Company?" repeated Andrew, interrogatively. "Company?"

"Yes—a young woman. She got off the five-five; an' nothin' would do her but the stage. She sez to me, 'I've been on this train before,' she sez, 'an' the stage *always* meets it.' 'Well,' I sez, 'it ain't runnin' to-night. Sorry,' I sez, 'but I'm afeard we can't accommodate ye.' So after a bit she starts off to walk. I tol' her how to git t' your place all right. 'Take yer first right,' I sez, 'f'om the red school-house; then yer first left.' She said she'd know your place when she seen it. Been thar before, I reckon."

Mr. McIlheny shook his head. "No one has come to the place to-night," he said, positively. "An' I've just been over the road wi' Maister Hugh."

The station-master pulled his cap more snugly about his ears, while he thoughtfully expectorated into the drift. "Guess the lady's got stuck in the snow," he opined, with a dubious chuckle. "She was too durned smart fer these parts—in winter," he added, ill-humoredly. "'F you know more'n I do 'bout this 'ere station,' I sez to her, 'well *an'* good.' She 'lowed the' ought to be a stage a-waitin', cause she'd come to ride in it! That's a fool way with these 'ere city folks. They know th' Lord made th' country all right; but they're darned sure he made it for their special benefit."

Mr. McIlheny paused with one foot in the sleigh. "What sort o' a lookin' lassie was she?" he asked, sharply. "Tall—eh—an' fair i' the face, wi' reddish hair knotted low i' the neck behind?"

The station-master stared at him contemplatively. "That's her!" he ejaculated. "Sure thing! Say, Andrew, if the young woman ain't arrove time you git home you'd best look

her up. She's been gone f'om here long enough to git to your place twice over. An' it's a night fit to freeze the gizzard out o' a brass monkey!"

He withdrew thoughtfully to the torrid comfort of a pipe of tobacco, smoked in the close proximity of the red-bellied stove within the waiting-room, while the sound of Andrew's clanking bells gradually died away along the road over which Mary had toiled nearly two hours earlier.

Mr. McIlheny drove rapidly till he reached the red school-house. Then he stopped the impatient mare and carefully examined the two divergent tracks by the dim light of his lantern.

"God help the poor lassie if she has wandered away a night like this!" he muttered.

The loose, trampled snow at the meeting-place of the roads gave no token; but a few yards farther on Andrew came upon a spot where the wind had swept a hillock nearly bare of snow, and here, clearly defined in

the crisp whiteness, were two slender foot-prints.

"Whoso'er she be, an' whatever her business wi' us, the poor young woman has e'en taken the wrong road," murmured Andrew, compassionately. Without hesitation he turned the mare's head away from home, and took the less frequented hill-road.

The young moon had already declined to her setting, and the brilliant sky was rapidly becoming overcast with heavy, low-lying clouds which seemed to emerge in vast droves from behind the rim of ocean, propelled by a silent wind which had not yet stooped to earth. "More snow," presaged Mr. McIlheny, casting a weather-wise eye aloft. Then he called aloud to the reluctant mare and shook the reins over her broad back.

They were entering the wood now, and thick darkness fell upon man and beast like a blanket. Andrew pulled the mare down to a slow walk and hung the lantern upon the dash-board, where it cast a wan glimmer over

the snowy road. Presently he stopped altogether and listened; it seemed to him he had heard a woman's voice.

"Whist, ye fule!" he commanded the mare, who was angrily shaking her harness, indignant at this unwonted detention from her warm stall with its half-eaten fodder. "Can't ye stan' still whilst I listen?"

"If I should—die—before I—wake, I pray thee, Lord, my soul—" The words, spoken clearly and distinctly, died away into a drowsy murmur of sound.

"Lassie! Where are you?" shouted Andrew, leaping from the sleigh. And then in a moment he had found her, leaning back against the trunk of a great hemlock-tree, whose sweeping, snow-laden branches half hid her from the anxious eyes of the old man.

"I was—tired," she said, dreamily, when he had pulled her roughly to her feet. "It seemed very warm in here away from the wind. I—I think I was going to—sleep."

Mr. McIlheny wasted no store of warm

breath in useless words. He half lifted, half dragged the girl into the sleigh and wrapped the blankets about her. Then the old mare was urged to a rate of speed which had never yet been demanded of her in all her leisurely life. She gave vent to her outraged feelings in a loud, distressed whinny, when her master finally pulled her to a stand-still before the door of the farm-house.

Permelia McIlheny had been employing the past hour in mild wonderment, pierced with somewhat querulous anxiety concerning "father," who had a cold threatening his chest, while every one of his carefully constructed "red-flannin lung-pads" were lying idle in his bureau-drawer. Miss McIlheny was indignantly sure of this; for she had twice counted them. She opened the door promptly at sound of the jingling vehicle without.

"Now, father, you come right straight into the house!" she said, peremptorily. "Jesse has been waiting in the kitchen this last half-hour. He can stable the mare quite as well as—"

"Whist, woman!" commanded her father, "an' help me get the lassie in the house. She's a' but perished wi' the cold!"

Mary smiled sweetly into Permelia's astonished eyes. "I—am—only very—tired," she said, and fell back white and still among the red cushions of Hugh's couch, where they laid her with all tenderness and despatch.

The energetic Miss McIlheny promptly stripped off the little fur jacket and the snowy shoes and stockings, and fell to chafing the girl's slender feet. "She isn't really frozen anywheres, as I can see," she said to Andrew, who was hanging over the limp figure in an agony of solicitude. "She's just beat out with walking in the cold. Just you heat a drop o' the old madam's current-wine over the kitchen-fire, father, an' bring it here quick as you can. Best take a drop yourself!" she called after him, with daughterly solicitude.

Mary opened her eyes presently, and obediently swallowed a mouthful of the hot wine

Permelia held urgently to her lips. Then she sat up and looked around.

"Where is—he?" she asked. "I—came to see—him."

Miss McIlheny's kind, anxious face grew suddenly cold and unresponsive. "If you was meaning Mr. Ghent," she said, stiffly, "he's not at home."

Mary's lip quivered; she seemed on the verge of tears. "I—wanted to see—him," she murmured, weakly.

"Well, Mr. Ghent isn't at home," repeated Miss McIlheny crisply. "He went away this very night. What time did you come?" she added, her curiosity getting the better of her resentment.

"I came on the five-o'clock train," said Mary, faintly. "I lost my way. I—I should have written instead of coming."

Miss McIlheny, with tightly compressed lips, busied herself with the fire. It was with an effort that she restrained the bitter words which filled her heart.

After a silence Mary roused herself to say, "I must go back to the city to-night. I—must go now, I think."

"Go back now—*to-night?*" repeated Permelia, in dazed astonishment. "That you can't do, mistress. There's no train. Sit you still and warm, while I fetch you something to eat."

She hurried away, sternly admonishing her conscience the while. "There's no train running that I'll allow father to take her to-night," she told herself; "and he with a cold threatening his chest, and the red-flannin lung-pads a-lying idle in his drawer. And the mare all drenched with sweat, too, and the other horses stabled snug and warm. She must even spend one night beneath this roof, whether she will or no, and in the morning I'll say to her what's on my tongue to say. I will so; and father nor any other man shall not keep me from it. The Lord has given her into my hand!"

XVII

THE singular conviction as to the futility of his journey which had settled upon Hugh Ghent, as he boarded the city-bound train, had increased to a feeling of gloom and despondency by the time he found himself inquiring for Mary at the house of her guardian on the following morning. It occurred to him that he had known beforehand that the haughty personage stationed at Judge Chantry's door would say to him in reply to his query:

"Mrs. Ghent is not at home, sir."

He hesitated visibly under Peter's stony gaze. "My name is Ghent," he said, at length, "and—"

"Won't you come in, sir," urged Peters, undergoing a sudden metamorphosis from a

footman to a man. "Judge Chantry will be wanting to see you, sir."

Judge Chantry, looking older than his wont and exceedingly worried, rose to greet his visitor with some warmth when Peters ushered him into the library.

"I hope you have come to tell me that my ward is at your house," he began.

Hugh looked at him carefully. "You are referring to—my wife?" he asked.

"Yes, to your wife—to Mary. She left my house last night with merely a word to Peters. She has not—er—as yet returned. Of course I have no doubt she is perfectly safe, yet—"

"I do not know where she is," said Hugh. This reply also he appeared to himself to have meditated for a long time previous to its utterance. "I have not seen her since our wedding-day," he added, heavily.

"I have already telegraphed to Miss Vivian, and received a reply," continued Judge Chantry, with tokens of rising anxiety. "Mary has not been there. I was about wiring you."

He looked keenly into the sombre face before him.

"Why didn't you come before?" he asked, abruptly.

"Because she didn't ask me to come," replied Hugh, meeting the old man's shrewd gaze with a look of defiant anger. "You've allowed another man—your nephew—to—to torment her. You'd better ask him where she is."

"You mean—Jerome," rejoined the judge, mildly. "I admit I have not discouraged Jerome's addresses, because—"

Hugh's eyes blazed upon him.

"Well, to be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Ghent, I found that my ward was considerably interested in yourself. You had—er—somehow contrived to— In short, I gathered that while she herself was quite unaware of it, she had a very profound faith in and esteem for her husband. I felt confident that this would in time—in time, mind you—ripen into a true wifely affection, and so—"

"And so you have allowed her to be decoyed away—no one knows where—by this fellow, Chantry. Where is he? He shall answer to me for her safety!"

"Not so fast, sir. Jerome knows nothing whatever of Mary's whereabouts; I can assure you of that. He is quite as anxious as I; it was he, in fact, who proposed telegraphing you. It is fair, I think, Mr. Ghent, that you should recognize the fact that I am entirely friendly to yourself. I was, quite naturally, displeased when I first heard of the marriage, for I had made different plans for Mary—I acknowledge it. But when I—er—had reason to believe that my ward cared for you, I took pains to look into your record; and I found to my surprise, sir, that your father was a very good friend of mine in earlier days. I also found that in many respects Mary could not have done better for herself. I did not see fit to make all of this known to her, nor did I press your claims by a hair's-breath. I recognized your sagacity in dealing with

Mary's rather—singular—nature, and I supposed you were fully aware of your advantage, and that you meant to follow it up. I own, sir, that I have been somewhat astonished at your negligence."

"I wrote to her," said Hugh, gloomily, "and she did not acknowledge my letter by even a word. Yesterday"—he drew a deep, choking breath of anger—"your nephew, Mr. Jerome Chantry, came to me asking for a release from the marriage—from her."

"The deuce he did!" exclaimed the old man, sharply. "He didn't tell me so!"

"I said I would give it—when—when she asked for it. I—"

At this instant the library door swung open softly and Jerome Chantry walked in. "Well, uncle," he began, "have you heard anything further—" His face stiffened. "*You*—has Mary—"

"No!" said Hugh, roughly. He leaped to his feet and confronted Jerome, who recovered himself on the instant.

"I merely thought—that is, the conversation I had with Mary yesterday recurred to my mind, and—"

"Mr. Ghent has just informed me of your visit to him yesterday, and its object," interrupted the judge. "You did not see fit to make me acquainted with the fact."

"On the contrary, I came to you for that express purpose this morning, uncle," said Mr. Chantry, smoothly. "I had just succeeded in obtaining from Mary her signature to the paper which Mr. Ghent was pleased to demand, and—"

"What do you mean?" Hugh's voice was hoarse and weak.

"Supposing for the moment—as I certainly choose to do until we hear to the contrary—that Mary has taken the not unusual liberty of spending the night with a friend, this is not a bad time to finish the business preliminary to the annulment of the marriage. If Mr. Ghent will kindly supplement this document with another, formally granting the request

herein named, I will at once place the matter in your hands for the usual legal procedures." And Jerome bowed politely to his elderly relative.

Hugh's haggard eyes devoured the brief contents of the paper, which the other handed him with a sneering smile. It was signed clearly, Mary Adams Ghent; it contained a formal demand for an unconditional release from her marriage.

"When was this signed?" he asked.

"Yesterday afternoon," answered Mr. Chantry, licking his lips nervously. "Would you like to look at it uncle?"

Judge Chantry scanned the paper carefully. "You drew this up, Jerome?" he asked, staring at his nephew keenly over the top of his glasses.

"Certainly, sir; I wished to spare her all unnecessary trouble and annoyance in the matter," said Jerome, glibly. "Mary is a most sensitive, shrinking woman," he added, sentimentally; "she particularly dreaded any—

"And she signed this, you say? When?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

Mr. Chantry occupied himself with an air of grave solicitude in producing a second paper from his pocket. "If Mr. Ghent will kindly—"

He stopped short, for Hugh's lean, brown hand had closed like a powerful vise upon his plump shoulder. He said not a word, but there was murderous anger in his blue eyes.

"Let him alone, my boy," said Judge Chantry, compassionately. Then he turned sharply to Jerome. "This paper is worth nothing, sir."

"Why—why not?" stammered Jerome; he had turned a disagreeable yellowish white about the lips.

"The signature is not—witnessed—for one thing," said the judge, solemnly. "It would be well, Jerome," he went on, after a pause, "if you will see fit to burn this paper—*now*. Do you understand?"

Mr. Chantry tore the document violently in

twain and cast the fragments upon the blaze. "She hates you!" he snarled, hysterically. "She—she despises you!"

"Tell me where she is?" threatened Hugh, stooping over him menacingly.

"I—I don't know; upon my word as a gentleman, I haven't seen her since yesterday. I—I left her—that is, I heard her go up stairs. Peters will tell you that—that she left the house more than an hour after I did."

"That is true," interrupted Judge Chantry, quietly.

Jerome was edging toward the door. "You will find everything I have told you is true —if you ever see her again," he added, darkly.

The two men heard the door close after him; then they looked at each other fixedly.

"No," said the judge, quietly, answering a ghastly fear which looked out from the other's haggard eyes. "Mary hasn't been very happy of late; but she is no coward. Go home, my boy; I believe you will find her

there. And if you find her there, keep her—this time!"

Hugh grasped the old man's outstretched hand. "I will," he said, solemnly.

XVIII

HEN Mary opened her eyes the next morning she lay for a long time conscious of nothing save a sense of profound peace. Snow was falling silently past her window in great, white, feathery flakes, and through it the pink light of morning was shining. The room in which she lay repeated these tones of pearl and rose in its white shadowed ceiling, over which flickered wandering glints of pink, and in the garlands of faded flowers which shone dimly on its walls; all else was whiteness and immaculate purity, like the chambered recesses of a lily. In her waking dream she tranquilly watched the sidelong flight of the fugitive drift as it swept unceasingly past the clear pane with its half-drawn draperies of shadowy muslin. She had not yet roused to

a realization of her whereabouts, when a light step paused at her bedside, and Permelia McIlheny's kind, anxious face stooped over her.

Mary's gray eyes flew wide and she gazed at the woman wonderingly.

"Did you rest well?" inquired Miss McIlheny, her soft contralto tones blending comfortably with the purring of the wood fire, which the girl, now fully awake, recognized as the source of the rosy reflections on the ceiling.

Mary sat up in bed, her long, red braids falling over her shoulders. "I have rested so well," she murmured, "that I'm afraid it is very late indeed."

Miss McIlheny bethought herself in time to draw up her plump figure with dignity. "I should not have disturbed you, Mistress Ghent, she said, "only that I saw your eyes were open."

"Has—has—he come yet?" asked Mary, with a timid flutter of her long lashes.

"No, madam, if you are meaning Master Hugh, he has not come. And he will not come to-day, nor yet to-morrow, if the storm continues, for the snow has filled the roads to choking. Whenever you are pleased to breakfast, madam, I will serve you. Will you do so before you rise?"

Mary shook her head. "No," she said, meekly; "I should prefer to come down, please."

Half an hour later she slowly descended the winding stairway and paused in the open door of the dining-room. It presented a most cheerful appearance with its blazing hearth and its rows of scarlet geraniums glowing against the drifting snow without, like lesser fires.

Miss McIlheny presently entered, followed by a stout, red-cheeked country girl, bearing fragrant coffee, eggs, and delicately browned rolls peeping out from a fringed napkin. Her demeanor was polite but chilling as she invited Mary to be seated at the little, round table

drawn into comfortable proximity to the blazing logs.

"I shall be very glad," said Mary, after an embarrassed silence, "if I may see a time-table. I must return to the city immediately."

Miss McIlheny promptly laid a folded paper before her, her air of strong disapproval deepening as she did so. "You're not thinking of going before Master Hugh comes home?" she asked, solemnly.

A faint color stole into Mary's pale cheeks. "I should like to see him," she said. "That is why I came; but—"

"There's no trains running this morning, and I thank the Lord for it!" announced Permelia, conclusively.

She searched the girl's downcast face with pitiless severity as she continued, "There's words that I must say to you, Mistress Ghent, before ever you leave this house. I have prayed God for the chance, and now that it has come I'll not pass it by!"

Mary lifted her gray eyes to the woman's

face, with a kind of sweet hardihood. "I am quite ready," she said, "to hear what you have to say."

Permelia drew a deep breath. "He has no mother to speak for him, and no father," she began, tremulously. "The Lord has laid it upon me to say this to you, madam: You've wronged Master Hugh; you'll not be caring whether it be so or not. But I can see—who have seen him every day since his birth—that his heart is just slow breaking wi' the pain o' it a'!"

Permelia lapsed into her father's Scotch brogue on the rare occasions when excitement got the better of her American-bred tongue.

"I do care," sighed Mary, with a troubled knitting of her white forehead.

"Ay, but how much do you care, mistress?" went on Permelia, her passionate tones deepening to an organ fulness. "What is it to you that he neither eats nor sleeps as he once did, and that his face is sad at a' times, when

once it was contented and glad? I promised his mother on her death-bed that I would look after Master Hugh, an' I must keep my word. Oh, I thought my task was wellnigh over the day he was married to you! I said to father, 'On the day the young mistress comes home to bide,' I said, 'you and I go to the cottage yonder—for I'll not interfere with the will o' a lady-wife, an' I've lived here o'er long wi' everything under my han' to be like an ordinar' servant.' But here I am yet—in your place, mistress—in your place; an' I'll ask you to tell me why! You wear his ring! You bear his name! Is his happiness—his life—naught to you?"

"It is much to me," said Mary, in a low, shamed voice.

"Then tell me you'll not leave him again!"

Mary's fair face burned with painful blushes. "You—you are cruel—you do not understand," she faltered. "He—has never asked me to—stay."

Miss McIlheny shrugged her shoulders in

a manner which revealed her Scotch temper dangerously near the surface. "I don't pretend to understand the sort o' marriage you made wi' Master Hugh," she said, with strong indignation. "'Tis true he made poor shift to explain to us about some institution o' learnin'" — Permelia's scorn almost passed bounds at this—"situated in foreign parts, and of how he wished to help you keep for yourself a great sum o' money! What's an institution o' learnin', I'll ask you, mistress — what's a great sum o' money — to a true and holy marriage in the sight o' God?"

Mary trembled to her feet. "It is nothing —nothing!" she cried, in a stifled voice. "But I did not know it—then!"

Her eyes brimmed over with large tears; she made no effort to restrain them, and they rolled shining over her pale cheeks.

Permelia leaned forward and eyed her unflinchingly. These great, sparkling tears did not touch her heart as they would have

touched the heart of a man. She knew from how shallow a source flowed the tears of many women. And this one she did not know.

"What think you o' the tears o' a *man*—eh?" she asked, in low, vibrant tones. "Ay, you may weep, mistress! But I have seen the hard-wrung water o' pain standin' in *his* eyes more than once o' late!"

Mary hid her quivering face from the woman's searching gaze. "Oh," she murmured, brokenly, "I would die to save him pain! But what can I do?"

Permelia's rugged face slowly relaxed, the puckers of wrath and strong indignation vanished from her brow, then her face brightened in the strong sunshine of her smile. "God forgie me!" she exclaimed, softly; "and to think I'm keepin' you from your hot breakfast a' this time wi' my foolish chatter. An' the girl Nancy has brought you no strawberry-jam, as I bade her. There's a bit o' fried chicken, too, keepin' hot before

the fire. Master Hugh 'll never forgie me if he finds you lookin' pale an' spent as you do now. An' you toilin' through a' the snow in the freezin' weather!"

Miss McIlheny hurried away with her apron to her eyes, leaving the girl to recover her vanished self-control.

After Mary had breakfasted, duly waited upon by the now beaming and gracious Permelia, she was shown about the house in state. The cupboards, the china-closets, the linen-chests, with all their store of treasure, were opened wide for her inspection; then the cellars, with their hoards of fruit, both fresh and preserved, the many-colored vegetables in barrels and bins, and rows of plump, rosy hams hanging from the rafters. After that the "best rooms," fragrant with spiced rose-leaves, and the guest-chambers, in their immaculate purity and order; and, last of all, "Master Hugh's room," littered with mute tokens of its absent owner.

The faint color in Mary's cheeks deepened

to a glorious rose, when her eyes fell upon a picture of herself hanging on the wall at the foot of his narrow bed.

"Do you think," she hesitated, "that he—would like to have you—to have me—see all this?"

Miss McIlheny fixed reproachful eyes upon the girl. "Did you suppose I would take any other woman into Master Hugh's rooms?" she asked. "Nay, madam, but his wife—!" Her eloquent gesture completed the sentence.

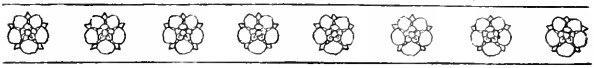
Mary blushed and sighed as her eyes roved timidly about the little room, almost cell-like in its bareness and simplicity.

"He is not one to prate overmuch of his feelings, is Master Hugh," went on Permelia, quietly. "I mind when he went away to college. He was an ambitious lad and fine at his books, and his mother was that proud and fond of him—so he went to Cambridge, as I said. At the holidays he came home, and he saw, as I had not seen—being with her all the time—the change in his mother's face. She was never

a rugged woman, and in those lonely months the white stillness which belongs to another world had somehow come upon her. As you have seen a field in autumn all shining with the silver frost, so it was with the madam; very beautiful she was always, but never more beautiful than in those days, to my mind, with her snow-white hair and her face white like a white flower in the sun, and her eyes shining with unearthly light.

"'I'll not leave her again,' says Master Hugh, and he kept his word. I never knew how he persuaded her, for she had aye a keen ambition for her one son, but he made some plan with his professors whereby he studied at his home, going to Cambridge now and again for lectures and the like; but never spending a night away from her, though he rose long before the sun, and came home late at night oftentimes.

"If you'll come down now to the library, I'll show you all his books, and where the madam sat while Master Hugh studied. Ay,



they were as happy as two lovers in those days, and afterward he was not sorry that he had sacrificed his gay youth to her; for he grew old and thoughtful beyond his years, did Master Hugh. I saw it, and father saw it, but she did not.

"Toward the last she wandered gently in her mind, thinking he was her husband instead of her son. 'You'll not leave me, Hugh?' she would say, with the tears in her voice. 'No, dear,' he would answer, 'I'll never leave you!' And again she would say, 'I dreamed that you died, Hugh dear, and that I was all alone; but it was a foolish dream, wasn't it?' 'A foolish, foolish dream, sweetheart,' he would say to her. And then she would laugh gently and nestle close to his shoulder, as he sat by her bed.

"These be his books, Mistress Ghent, set together on these four shelves. He studied in them by the window yonder, where the light is good; and times the madam sat in the low chair at his side, and other times, as she

grew weaker, she lay on the couch drawn near him—always near him.

"I'll not soon forget the day he brought home his scholar's degree—for he got it, ay, he got it, mistress, and you can see it hanging there. But it stands for more than mere book-learning, I'm thinking. And now, if you'll be pleased to excuse me, I must look to the maid Nancy. She is a good maid and willing. I got her in the house the day of the wedding, to train against the day of your home-coming, madam. You will find her ignorant and foolish about many things, such as soap and the care of the drippings and the conserving of fruits, but in the end she'll make you a good servant—and, for the matter of that, I shall be no farther away than the farm cottage, if you should need me."

Left to herself, Mary sat quite still in Hugh's study-chair, her eyes fixed dreamily on his hard-won bachelor's degree. She was thinking of the frail, dearly loved mother with hair like drifted snow and flower-fair face to whom

he had been son and lover in one, unfalteringly faithful to the end. Then all on a sudden, it seemed, her soul, but half-awakened and still dreaming, unfolded like the petals of a glorious rose into the full beauty of passionate womanhood.

She did not perceive the tall shadow that passed over the drift without, nor hear the hushed voices of surprise and welcome at the door, but his step on the conscious floor roused her from the reverie into which she had fallen.

"Mary!" he said, and waited for her to speak.

"I—I came to—see you," she stammered.

"Yes," he breathed.

His sombre eyes were fixed upon her face with an inscrutable look which she dared not interpret. She folded one white hand over the other, and the dazzling snow-light glimmered on his ring.

"You said I was to come to you—when—that is, if I was in any trouble," she said, at last. "That is why I came. I—I am—I have been—very unhappy."

He drew a hard breath. "You did right to come to me," he said, hoarsely.

After a difficult pause he went on. "Won't you tell me, Mary, what—I can do—to—help you?"

Still she was silent, and he saw her delicate finger-tips whiten in the close grip of her tremulous hands.

"Mary," he said, his tones falling deep and compassionate on her shrinking silence, "there must be no foolish barriers of reserve between us now. Everything must be said that is to be said."

"And — then?" She half whispered the words. "You know—what—he—said?"

"Are you referring to my interview with Jerome Chantry, Mary?" he asked, his voice suddenly cold and steady through all its pain.

"Yes," she whispered. Her eyes entreated him.

"He demanded your release, Mary, in your name, and I told him I would give it to you—

when you asked for it. Have you come here to ask me for that?"

She did not answer; she could not; but he saw a blighting change pass swiftly over her face.

"You need not ask, Mary," he went on, quietly. "You are free — absolutely. I am ready to sign any paper—to do anything. I had no right to lay the fetters of a loveless marriage upon your white soul. Nay, there is no bond between us, for my promise without yours is empty of all significance. I know this now, Mary, for I too have suffered. But before you go away from me—"

She had risen, and was standing white and mute before him, as if turned into a lovely image of snow.

"I must tell you the truth; for it is the only shadow of excuse I can offer for the injury I have done you. I loved you, Mary, from the first moment I saw you coming across the fields. I loved you then, I love you now; and it is my dearest sorrow that I must love you forever."

Then once again he beheld the holy miracle of her virgin blush tinging the pallor of her downcast face with love's exquisite aurora.

"Mary!" he cried aloud, in an anguish of entreaty.

She turned to him with all the glory of her womanhood shining in her eyes.

"Hugh, I promise to love you, to cherish you, and forsaking all others, to keep you, till by death we are parted."

She said the solemn words slowly and unfalteringly. And he knew in the deep places of his soul that this plighting of their troth was never to be interrupted by death, but would endure on and on, as a chord of celestial harmony which dawns out of the silence and returns to it again, but is never wholly lost, nor indeed can be, for it bears within itself that which is eternal.

THE END

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